

Report by Timothy P. Williams,  
winner of the 2013 Education Development Trust **Tim Morris** Award

# Great expectations: aspiration, uncertainty and schooling in Rwanda





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## Welcome to Education Development Trust

Education Development Trust, established over 40 years ago as the Centre for British Teachers and later known as CfBT Education Trust, is a large educational organisation providing education services for public benefit in the UK and internationally. We aspire to be the world's leading provider of education services, with a particular interest in school effectiveness.

Our work involves school improvement through inspection, school workforce development and curriculum design for the UK's Department for Education, local authorities and an increasing number of independent and state schools, free schools and academies. We provide services direct to learners in our schools.

Internationally we have successfully implemented education programmes for governments in the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia, and work on projects funded by donors such as the Department for International Development, the European Commission, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the World Bank and the US Agency for International Development, in low- and middle-income countries.

Surpluses generated by our operations are reinvested in our educational research programme. Please visit [www.educationdevelopmenttrust.com](http://www.educationdevelopmenttrust.com) for more information.

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## The Tim Morris Award

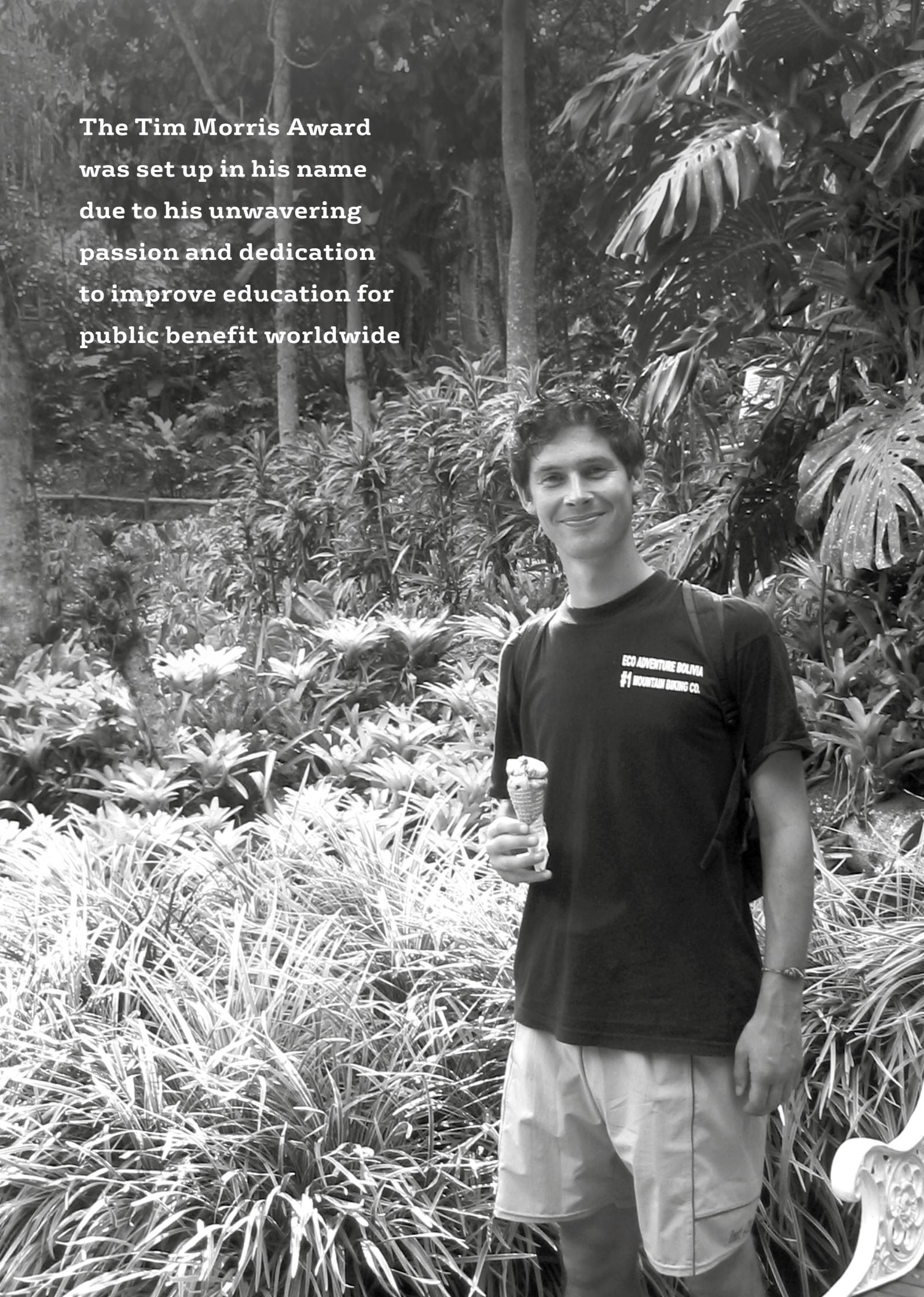
Tim Morris (1982-2012) was dedicated to providing education to those less fortunate in the developing world. As a key player in CfBT Education Trust's (now Education Development Trust) Business Development department, Tim was instrumental in designing and providing education and employment opportunities for the world's most disadvantaged people. Tim's experience in international education and economics led to the completion of his Masters in Educational Planning, Economics and International Development at the Institute of Education. Tim's dream was to use this foundation to launch his career on aid projects in the developing world. However, Tim was just 29 when his life was tragically cut short by cancer. The Tim Morris Award was set up in his name due to his unwavering passion and dedication to improve education for public benefit worldwide. While Tim is now unable to continue working to help those most in need, his legacy will continue to make a difference.

Launched in May 2012, Education Development Trust's 'Tim Morris Award' offers £2,000 in financial support to a PhD or MPhil student in the field of Education or International Development. The award's aim is to support field research in a developing country.

Our thanks go to Tim's family for their ongoing support and involvement; to Anna Riggall, Alex Elwick and Jess Moore from CfBT's Research and International Development and Education Departments, for their work in selecting and supporting the recipient; and to Laela Adamson, PhD candidate at University College London Institute of Education, recipient of the 2014 Award and author of this report.

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# Introduction

**Rwanda's redevelopment efforts have concentrated on establishing a new economic trajectory for the country, one which places a strong emphasis on transformation from a subsistence-based society to a knowledge-based economy. Becoming educated has been cast with a sense of urgency. Radio broadcasts now declare education, rather than cows or land as in the past, to be 'children's inheritance' and the key to unlocking children's developmental potential.**

Through its basic education policy, the government has focused on extending access so that more children, particularly those from poor households, have more access to post-primary levels of schooling.<sup>1</sup>

By 2012, the number of girls and boys attending government-run primary and secondary schools had never been at higher levels.<sup>2</sup> While access to the formal education system has successfully and quickly been expanded, commensurate efforts to ensure children receive a quality educational experience have proven challenging. Recent policy reports have suggested that, in the context of rapid expansion of access, materials such as books and laboratory equipment are in short supply; teachers are underpaid; and the country's recent shift to English as the medium of instruction has impacted on learning outcomes to a significant extent.<sup>3</sup>

Within this set of opportunities and constraints, little is known about how children understand this push for education for themselves and the ways in which schooling informs how they think about their lives and the possibilities for the future. In the following study, I draw upon data from 11 months of ethnographic research in a rural setting in Rwanda's Eastern Province in order to shed light on children's subjective experiences of their education. Students occupy distinctive social roles and spaces within the institutional context of the school. This study aimed to use their unique vantage point to support a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which national education policy is understood and experienced within the local sphere.

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<sup>1</sup>MINEDUC (2013). <sup>2</sup> NISR (2012). <sup>3</sup> Abbott et al., (2015); DeStefano and Ralaingita, (2011); Paxton and Mutesi, 2012; Pearson, (2013)



# Education in Rwanda

**Children's education in Rwanda must be understood in relation to the government's ambitious and broad social and economic development aims. Citing overpopulation and depleting natural resources, the government sought to transition from a subsistence-based to a market-oriented, knowledge-based economy. Education has been central to these aims.<sup>4</sup>**

Children are constitutionally entitled to six years of fee-free primary education.<sup>5</sup> In 2009, a Nine Years Basic Education Policy (9YBE) was introduced in order to ensure that every child in Rwanda also had access to three years of lower secondary education (Senior 1–3). In 2012, the 9YBE policy was extended for the three years of upper secondary school (i.e. 12YBE). According to the most recent census, net enrolment in secondary school was 20 per cent and gross enrolment was 40 per cent.<sup>6</sup> These figures are expected to rise as the system continues to expand. The government's efforts to expand basic education policy quickly and in a cost-effective manner have garnered international recognition and respect. In 2012 the Ministry of Education beat 122 other entries worldwide to receive the prestigious Commonwealth Education Good Practice Award.

The basic education policy was designed to make secondary-level education both affordable and accessible to communities, particularly children from poor households who might have otherwise had to discontinue their studies after primary school. Schools of basic education are considered to be government secondary schools; however, they are distinct from what government secondary schools have historically looked like. In the past, government secondary schools were almost always boarding schools.<sup>7</sup> Schools of basic education are community-based day schools. As such, children who attend schools of basic education typically reside with their families and walk to and from school each day.

According to the Ministry of Education, children who have sufficient grades in their primary school or lower secondary national examination may be permitted entry into one of the 60 'Schools of Excellence' located across the country.<sup>8</sup> Schools of Excellence are government-affiliated boarding schools. Unlike schools of basic education, they are not fee-free. The costs are subsidised by the government, but students are expected to pay fees such as tuition, materials and boarding-related

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<sup>4</sup> MINECOFIN (2000). <sup>5</sup> RoR (2003). <sup>6</sup> NISR (2012). <sup>7</sup> King (2014). <sup>8</sup> MINEDUC (2011).

expenditures.<sup>9</sup> Schools of Excellence are often able to attract more qualified teachers and provide a higher-quality educational experience for young people.

Although the prospect of attending a government boarding school offers an incentive for young people to do well in their national examination, places are extremely competitive and costs still prohibitive for some.

With the introduction of the basic education system, children were given greater levels of access to secondary level schooling. Before the introduction of the basic education policy, for those who failed their primary-level exam (or were unable to pay the tuition), continuation of their studies was far less assured. Some support was available through different initiatives such as the fund for genocide survivors called FARG (from the French *Fonds d'Appui aux Rescapés du Génocide*), faith-based organisations, or NGOs. The opportunity for children to continue their studies beyond primary school was not official education policy. The introduction of basic education constituted a marked shift by the government. Post-primary schooling can now best be understood as entitlement and basic rights for all children.<sup>10</sup>

In Rwanda the rapid expansion of the education system has been accompanied by a range of challenges pertaining to quality. More students necessitate more schools, classrooms, teachers, and material provisions. Qualified teachers remain in short supply, in part because other professional opportunities that require similar levels of training are often better compensated.<sup>11</sup> There is some evidence to suggest that the most qualified teachers gravitate to better-paying opportunities in boarding schools or in schools in wealthier, urban areas which can often supplement teacher salaries through the school's Parent Teacher Association.<sup>12</sup>

Compounding these challenges has been the switch in the language of instruction used in classrooms. In 2008 Rwanda switched from French to English as the medium of instruction. This change coincided with the country's inclusion as a Commonwealth country and recent membership into the East African Community. To transition to English the government has provided language training courses to teachers and hired English-language mentors to work in schools. Between 2008 and 2011 an estimated 88,000 teachers received training in English.<sup>13</sup> Despite these efforts, studies suggest the English language continues to pose significant challenges to children's learning in the classroom. A recent study of 600 primary and secondary teachers commissioned by the British Council found that 94 per cent had only a 'beginner' or 'elementary' knowledge of the English language.<sup>14</sup> The challenge of language extends beyond the institutional context of the school. Abbott and colleagues (2015) point out that most parents do not speak English, and are thus unable to be of assistance with their children's homework.

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<sup>9</sup>Williams (2013). <sup>10</sup>Paxton (2012), MINEDUC (2013). <sup>11</sup>Abbott et al (2015). <sup>12</sup>Paxton (2012), Abbott et al (2015). <sup>13</sup>Abbott (2013). <sup>14</sup>Simpson (2013).





# Methods

**The purpose of this study was to better understand the subjective experiences and perspectives of young people passing through the education system. I opted for a single-site case study in order to build sufficient levels of rapport and trust with participants. I hoped that this in-depth investigation would provide a level of depth about ‘what was really going on’ within a limited geographic location,<sup>15</sup> the intention being that the lessons learned could produce new insights concerning the intersection of development, schooling, and children’s lives in Rwanda.**

The case study focused on a rural sector located in Rwanda’s Eastern Province. While no attempt is made to generalise at a national level, the experiences of the young people in this study can be seen as shedding light on the type of experiences that children across much of the country living in similar conditions might encounter in a school of basic education. About 43 per cent of residents lived under the poverty line, a figure which is comparable to other rural districts in the Eastern Province.<sup>16</sup> Ready access to amenities such as electricity and clean water is slowly improving but remains limited. Most households relied on different forms of agriculture for their livelihoods. It would be inappropriate to suggest that the situation facing young people in a rural setting will be the same as for young people in schools in an urban setting such as the capital city of Kigali, where conditions differ considerably. However, the experience of young people in this rural area could be considered typical by the fact that three-quarters of children in Rwanda live in rural areas and that most attending secondary education now did so at a school of basic education such as the one I focus on in this study.<sup>17</sup>

I carried out a total of nine months of ethnographic fieldwork in 2012 and two months of follow-up work in 2014. Social scientists have found ethnography to be an effective way for exploring children’s experiences. “Ethnography” refers to a collection of methods that emphasise flexibility, reflexivity, and sustained social contact.<sup>18</sup> Such an open-ended and flexible approach to research “encourages researchers to focus on the ongoing roles which children play and the meanings they themselves attach to their lives”.<sup>19</sup> In 2012, I carried out qualitative research within the seven schools in the area and also the surrounding community. To build a sufficient level of depth, I gradually narrowed my focus to three schools,

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<sup>15</sup>Yin (2009). <sup>16</sup>NISR (2011). <sup>17</sup>NISR (2012). <sup>18</sup>Wolcott (1999). <sup>19</sup>Prout and James (1997: 4).

including a primary school, a boarding secondary school, and a school of basic education. I drew from unstructured and semi-structured qualitative methods to conduct classroom-based observations, group discussions, individual interviews and group interviews, photo elicitation, and photo projects. I also held formal and informal discussions with school administrators, teachers, member of the wider administrators, teachers, members of the wider school community, representatives from NGOs, and local government officials.

Most of my in-depth work was undertaken at a lower secondary (Senior 1-3) school called GSR. It was a school of basic education, and as such, was typical of the type of school structure that the government hopes to continue to expand. Some students at this school attended because they did not pass their national examination but wished to continue their studies. Others did well on their examinations but could not afford to attend a boarding school. Like the majority of households in Rwanda, those who attended this school were typically from households that relied on some form of agricultural production for their livelihoods.<sup>20</sup> Students who attended the school were generally poor; however, their families had adequate financial stability to pay the various direct and indirect expenses associated with attending a school of basic education.<sup>21</sup>

The core of my study centred upon a collaboration with 16 focal students who attended this school. The experiences of these students were the microcosm through which I investigated broader themes concerning aspiration, uncertainty, and schooling. My work with focal students was far from a single data collection event, but rather an ongoing collaboration. I drew from multiple methods including life history interviews, home visits, journal activities, focus groups, and informal discussions.<sup>22</sup> Focal students also shared one common characteristic: as Senior 3 students in 2012, they were in the terminal phase of their lower secondary studies. When I returned in 2014, all had transitioned elsewhere for work or further study.

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<sup>20</sup>(NISR, 2011). <sup>21</sup>Williams et al (2014). <sup>22</sup>Boyden and Ennew (1997), Williams and Rogers (2014).





# Findings

Study findings presented in this section centre upon some of the core themes identified throughout this project, with a particular focus on the meaning and significance young people at GSR assigned to their educational experience. The sections that follow focus on children's engagement with the material dimensions of their schooling, the impact of the English language policy in shaping classroom experience, the values that young people and other administrators assigned to the experience of being a student at GSR, and how young people's experience informed how they came to think about themselves and their futures.

## Material constraints

At GSR, there was a hierarchy of the types of subjects which children hoped to pursue. The government's emphasis on transformation into a knowledge-based economy encouraged students to favour the sciences, while 'second tier' subjects included history, economics and geography. The upper secondary combinations that most students at GSR wished to study included classes in biology, physics, chemistry, mathematics or computers. The prospect of such a combination kept alive the possibility that they might one day become a scientist, mechanical engineer or doctor. This can be seen in the case of Théophile, a Senior 3 student at GSR, his strongest subjects were history and geography. His weakest were chemistry and physics. Despite his struggles with the sciences, they were the subjects that most interested him. "I enjoy sciences because Rwandan government is promoting them at the moment," he said. However, students at his school expressed concerns that there was a gap between the types of careers and subjects they were encouraged to pursue and the resources available to facilitate their learning of these subjects. The government's emphasis on the importance of sciences for the future suggested to these young people that they should study sciences. Given the absence of resources, students felt that their school operated with a handicap compared to better-resourced schools.

The government's emphasis on transformation into a knowledge-based economy encouraged students to favour the sciences, while 'second tier' subjects included history, economics and geography

The students were pleased to have the opportunity to attend school but they also did not feel they were receiving an education capable of competing against better-resourced schools. Many went through their entire secondary school experience at GSR without entering a laboratory. As one boy in a focus group at GSR put it, "At these [schools of basic education] students don't have laboratory materials to practise."

Students indicated that failing to have basic scientific equipment impacted upon their ability to learn well.

Laboratory experiments and demonstrations were described as theoretical – a challenge that was beyond the control of the teacher. A student's knowledge of what a Bunsen burner looked like depended exclusively on the teacher's diagrams drawn on the blackboard – diagrams the teacher had copied out of a textbook. The demonstration and description of the scientific equipment, experiments, and chemical changes were thus left to the artistic and oratorical skills of the teacher. Students pointed out the shortcomings of their school in terms of the resources available. In a group discussion with Senior 3 boys, Jean Paul, 19, explained: "Here at this school, there is no laboratory for practice. Teachers can teach chemistry, but they don't know too much about the practical aspects of what they teach."

Claude, 17, expressed his concern about the lack of science equipment at his school in the following way:

*"It is not good to only focus on theory... Our chemistry teacher came into the classroom and told us 'electrolysis of copper sulphate' in theory, but students at other schools learn it in practice. When we revise our notes, we don't really know what this means, and then we fail. We really need chemistry and physics laboratories. We require more practical experience."*

Claude went on to explain that while he and his fellow students at GSR are studying hard in hopes of doing well in the national examination, those students who attend schools with better resources are at a distinct advantage:

*"The government only prepares one national exam. We take the same exam done by the children of ministers who go to good schools [that have access to laboratories and other materials]. That is why the best students, those who perform well in national exams, are from cities."*

By the time Senior 3 GSR students had progressed to Senior 4, many had adjusted their educational aspirations downward.

When I first met Frank in 2012, for example, he said he wished to become a doctor. He had passed his primary school examination but could not afford to go to the boarding school he was assigned, so he went to GSR. He did not do well in his Senior 3 exam in 2012. The only option he had to continue his studies at A-level was at a school of basic education located a 90-minute walk from his home. Frank's new school offered the option of studying mathematics, chemistry and biology – a combination that presumably would have allowed Frank to keep alive his wish of becoming a doctor or a nurse. However, when he arrived at the school at the beginning of the year, Frank explained to me that he looked around at his school. He noticed the school had no electricity. It did not have a laboratory. And,

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in part because the school was still under construction, the classrooms did not yet have windows or doors. To study chemistry or biology would require materials that his new school would be unable to offer. As a result, Frank opted to study history, economics and geography – subjects that could be mostly studied out of a textbook – rather than depend on materials the school did not have. Should he have focused on science it would only be a theoretical exercise, much as it was at his previous school, GSR.

## The effect of English

The introduction of English as the language of instruction also impacted on the experience of being a student at GSR to a significant extent. English was the medium of instruction used in all subjects. It meant that a working knowledge of English was a prerequisite for learning material in classes such as chemistry, social studies, mathematics, or computers. Yet, English textbooks were in short supply, and many teachers at GSR were still working to establish a basic competency in English for themselves.

The English language policy had the effect of putting both students and teachers in a difficult situation: for teachers, to teach in a language they did not know; for students, to be taught and tested in a language they did not understand. My discussions with local officials, headmasters, teachers and students often centred around the challenge of language.

As a primary school headmaster put it:

*"Today all schools are supposed to teach in English but we don't have trained English teachers. English is a foreign language and one the students don't understand. What's more, teachers too do not understand English."*

The English policy presented one of the most poignant issues and it produced a degree of frustration for students and school administrators. Most young people I met with expressed a strong commitment to becoming educated, but without a solid grasp of English, most students felt they were hard-pressed to do well. Given that school-issued textbooks were in short supply, student notebooks assumed the function of textbooks. Their notes were their transcription of their teacher's own transcription from a textbook. An error, misspelling, or misunderstood idea was likely to be reproduced in students' notebooks, studied, and later reproduced in the examination. This transmission of information was challenging for students learning English. New material in any subject that used English had the effect of introducing children to a new set of English words and concepts that needed to be clearly understood if they were to be accurately absorbed into the lexicon of students. For instance, a statement written on the blackboard "a pipette is used for chemistry", if written unclearly on the blackboard, might be copied down as "apipetteis used for chemistry."

Yvette, 17, a Senior 3 student at GSR, said she did not think her own teachers felt confident in their abilities in English. She said her teachers expected students to copy and recite material verbatim in an examination rather than critically engaging with the subject material:

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*“When we are answering questions in history, we shouldn’t have to memorise word-by-word. [...] But if we change any word they cannot give us good marks because they want us to write and memorise word-by-word what we wrote in our notebooks without changing anything. But for me, the most important thing is to know ideas. Those teachers here, they are not good at English.”*

The timing of the policy change impacted students at GSR particularly hard. Perhaps the struggles with English can be best understood by learning from the experience of Théophile, a Senior 3 student at GSR. According to his mother, Théophile was given his French-sounding name “according to the background of Rwanda” and its historical connection with the Francophone system. It had little to do with any particular linguistic affinity that either she or Théophile’s father had for the language itself. Neither parent spoke any language except for Kinyarwanda.

When he was still in primary school, Théophile’s learning was not progressing as well as his mother had expected, so she decided to have her son repeat the school year. He was doing fine in school, his mother explained – not the best and not the worst. The primary reason she had her son repeat Primary 4 was that she wanted to be sure he was fully prepared to study in French. At the time, Primary 4 was the first year that all subjects were taught fully in French, and students took their examinations in French. Being comfortable in the language of instruction at school was seen as a central factor for future academic success. “We thought that if we allowed him to be promoted to P5 without knowledge in French it might not be easy for him to catch up,” she stated.

It was not possible for Théophile or his parents to have anticipated the language change from French to English – one which occurred less than two years after Théophile repeated a year in school to improve his French. By the time he sat for the Primary 6 national examination the language had changed to English. “I did not get good marks,” Théophile explained of his Primary 6 national examination. “That is why he went there [to GSR],” rather than a government boarding school, added his mother.

In my fieldwork, Théophile and his counterparts focused their concern more on how the language shift impacted on their educational experience. It compounded other struggles within the education system such as limited books or other materials. Most young people I met with expressed enthusiasm for the government’s intended trajectory for the country. They wanted to become educated and to learn English. Yet, they felt that their school did not have the capacity to equip them to learn English well.

A few months before national examinations, Théophile explained his biggest concern: “I don’t know English and it is the language we use for all subjects.” He studied hard for the examination, but he did not do well.

Being comfortable in the language of instruction at school was seen as a central factor for future academic success

## Valuing basic education

Throughout the duration of my fieldwork, it was clear that the young people I worked with valued the opportunity to continue with their schooling. However, it also became clear that the values conferred to the institutional context of a school of basic education were more complex than I had originally anticipated.

GSR was a school in which academic performance was low – but so were expectations. Young people took their cues from their peers, teachers, school administrators, and members of their family and community. In a group discussion with primary schools students, a 13-year-old boy explained why it was important not to attend a school of basic education:

*“You can pass the national examination, but if your parents don’t have money, then you will attend these Nine Year [9YBE] schools. Then when you meet other students they will think of you as a failure, that you failed the national examination – even though it isn’t true.”*

Similar sentiments were expressed by other children. It was not that young people thought of themselves as failures, per se, but in the absence of qualified and committed teachers, effective teaching using English, and sufficient numbers of books and laboratory supplies, failure felt imminent. These young people saw basic education schools as a safety net, designed to cater for the poor as well as those who did not do well in their primary school examinations. Yet, there was widespread recognition that being educated at a school of basic education such as GSR conferred less value compared with other secondary schools. In a group discussion at GSR, Stephen, 16, stated:

*“The teachers here look at the name of the school. It is called a Nine Years of Basic Education school. So they don’t give it value. They neglect this school. They don’t teach us well or efficiently.”*

In the same discussion, Felix, 19, added:

*“Because we are day students [who do not go to boarding school], many people think that we are not intelligent. They don’t know that there are some students who have succeeded the [Primary 6] national examination but who have failed to get money to go to boarding schools. We suggest that people should value us, to consider us to be capable students.”*

Some students felt as if there was a ‘dumbing down’ of the curriculum. Immaculate, 17, explained that she felt that teachers at GSR had little faith in the abilities of students, so they reduced the burden of work they assigned to them. She said it left her classmates ill-prepared to compete with other schools where students were taught the full curriculum.

Whether students were or were not able to handle the amount of materials assigned to them was to miss the broader concern expressed by Immaculate and many of her fellow students at GSR. It was the lack of faith or belief that students felt their teachers and school administrators had in their ability to do well. The lack of value at the level of the institutional context of a school of basic education translated into a lack of value placed in students on the part of school administrators as well as children and families. This in turn, impacted upon how young people thought about themselves as students and the possibilities available for them in the future.

In the quotation below, the Director of Studies at GSR expressed the view that young people struggled with what it meant to be a student at a school of basic education:

*“The challenges we face [as school administrators] here [at GSR] is that the students don’t put good effort into their studies. They compare themselves with*

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*boarding school students and feel that they are failures [...]. Their mindset is that they are here because they were not smart enough to get into a good school. 'Why am I even here?' they ask themselves. They feel that they are not clever... They think of themselves as students who will never do anything important for themselves."*

This statement helps to triangulate the assertions made by young people at GSR. It also compels us to consider the ways in which this type of belief by administrators informed the ways administrators chose to support – or not support – their own students. The GSR school administration blamed students for being uncommitted and for being failures. Students blamed the administration for being uncommitted *and for viewing them* as failures. However, their collective concern was a shared one: as a school of basic education, GSR did not allow students to believe they had a real possibility of doing well.

### **"We cannot stop our studies"**

For young people in this study, the message was clear: children's schooling, rather than land, as in the past, was to be children's inheritance. Yet, for the students at GSR their school held little promise of social mobility. Being a student at GSR did not provide the skills and the opportunities most had expected or hoped for. Yet, nearly all wished to continue their education for as long as possible. In other words, if given the option between what might be considered to be a 'bad' education or no education, the choice was relatively straightforward.

Young people valued the opportunity to continue their schooling but were also confronted by a realisation that basic education at GSR held little value, when they compared their school to other secondary schools that were not schools of basic education. Given these constraints, perceptions of possibility were revised accordingly. When he was a Senior 3 student at GSR, Anastase deplored the basic education system. He was adamant that he would not continue at such a school for upper secondary studies. However, he did not perform well in the Senior 3 national examination and was unable to attend a boarding school.

For Anastase, continuing his studies at a school of basic education was far from what he had envisioned for himself, but as a young person from a poor family, if he wanted to continue his studies, 12YBE schools were the only option. "If I dropped out of school, I wonder how I would feel if I saw my friends and colleagues going to school and coming home, with me just staying home," he said. Anastase did not think highly of the basic education school he attended for upper secondary school – but in his view, it was better than the alternative of staying at home.

After leaving GSR after Senior 3, Evette continued her studies at a 12YBE school. She enjoyed her studies but her expectations for the future had noticeably shifted away from attaining economic security. In 2012 she had talked about the possibility of attending a university. By 2014, her resolve to remain in school was unchanged, but her expectations had changed.

If given the option between what might be considered to be a 'bad' education or no education, the choice was relatively straightforward

*"We cannot stop our studies. [...] If we leave school, it might be difficult to find a job, except maybe to be a housekeeper. When you are a housekeeper without education, your boss might consider you to be a stupid person. But when you went to school you can be a respected person."*

It was in a discussion with Patrick that many of these issues came to a head. Patrick was a motivated student but was not offered a place at a boarding school after his 2012 national examination. When we met in 2014, Patrick had altered his expectations about the types of opportunities his schooling would lead to. But he was also committed to completing his studies:

*"[In the past] it was clear that some people couldn't afford going to school – that is why they came up with those inferior schools [e.g. GSR] – to facilitate poor people who stay in the countryside. Those schools prevent poor kids from poor families from being street kids. Even after completing your studies you can dig but you dig in different ways compared with those who didn't go to school. [...] Those schools [GSR] helped us to get basic knowledge. But we are also different from those who go to those good schools. [...] Those students who go to good schools study in good conditions because they have qualified teachers. They don't walk to school because they stay in boarding schools. But also we are happy because we have those 12YBE schools. Instead of going to dig or becoming a street boy we join those schools. We improve our skills and we can get degrees. Maybe if companies are hiring we can apply. You can be jobless but at least someone who is jobless who has a degree."*

Patrick's statement succinctly summarises the views of many students I met with: while their experience at GSR did not confer the set of skills and opportunities they were expecting, it was nonetheless important to remain in school. Schools of basic education suggested to focal students that they should remain in school but that some opportunities to which they had once aspired would be foreclosed. Still, they aspired to be educated. They wanted to read road signs that were written in English, to work at a salon, to avoid subsistence-based agriculture, and, more generally, *to not be considered someone who was uneducated*. Their studies still functioned as a form of distinction. Through their studies they learned who they were – but also who they were not. As Patrick's quotation above suggested, it was difficult for him to say that he and his basic education counterparts were educated in the same way as a student who attended a well-regarded boarding school. Most would not be able to hold a conversation in English, but hopefully they would be able to read road signs. If they wanted to look for a job, they felt they were going to be at a disadvantage compared to their boarding school counterparts. But for the young people I worked with, attending school provided them with a level of dignity and self-respect. Their schooling did not provide the forms of distinction, status, and skills that came with attending an institution that was not a school of basic education. But it provided distinction in another way: attending a basic education school distinguished them from those who had no education at all. For Patrick and his colleagues at GSR, there was value and dignity to be found in that.

For the young people I worked with, attending school provided them with a level of dignity and self-respect



# Discussion

**In Rwanda, as elsewhere, a great deal of emphasis is often placed upon the need to sensitise households to the value of schooling. What makes this study somewhat unique, then, is that the young people at GSR largely embraced the government's call to be educated. Through the pioneering basic education policy, young people at GSR had the opportunity to continue their studies beyond primary school. At the same time, young people also identified challenges, such as the English language policy and lack of school materials, that were barriers toward more fully realising their aspirations of becoming educated. Recent research has utilised national-level data to report on some of these challenges.<sup>23</sup> This case study contributes to this literature by offering an in-depth account for how these opportunities and challenges qualitatively informed children's engagement with their schooling, including how it shaped how they came to think about themselves as students and the possibilities for the future.**

Young people maintained a strong commitment to continuing their studies, even while the expected outcomes concerning social mobility were uncertain

Within this set of conditions, young people maintained a strong commitment to continuing their studies, even while the expected outcomes concerning social mobility were uncertain. The mixed valuation young people assigned to their educational experience is an area that appears to be an issue of growing concern across the country. For example, in a recent newspaper editorial entitled "All Schools Are Good Enough," published in a Rwandan newspaper, *The New Times* (19 January 2015), the authors of the editorial implored children and families in Rwanda to embrace schooling, even if it did not take the particular form they might have expected or wanted. "You can enrol in any other school and still pursue your dream career and make it in life," the editorial stated. However, the subjective accounts of young people in my study challenge the basis of the assertions made in the editorial. Young people at GSR were unequivocally pleased to have the chance to have access to more years of schooling through basic education, but they also suggested that their educational experience was fundamentally different than those children who, as Claude put it, "went to good schools." Students at GSR located themselves and their schooling in relation to the broader educational context. It drew them into an awareness in terms of how they came to understand their schooling and how it informed how they thought about the possibilities for

<sup>23</sup> Abbott et al., (2015).

the future. Schools of basic education were markedly less expensive than their boarding school counterparts. Yet, schools of basic education were also perceived in this study as being ‘cheaper’—or lesser—in other ways. On one hand they maintained a steadfast commitment to continuing their education; on the other hand, many wondered to what extent they were gaining the skills or the credentials that would lead to employment or economic security.

What cuts across these study findings is the issue of education quality. Improving quality has been identified as a core concern within Rwanda’s education sector.<sup>24</sup> This issue is, of course, not unique to the Rwandan context. A number of developing-country contexts grapple with extending and expanding access whilst maintaining a reasonable amount of quality in accordance with broader commitments to the UN Millennium Development Goals, Education For All, and Universal Primary Education. Improving quality has been identified by the Rwandan government as an “important challenge” and as such, features as a key cornerstone in the country’s most recent Education Sector Strategic Plan.<sup>25</sup>

That teachers, head teachers, and students at GSR—and at other schools in this study—characterised schools of basic education similarly warrants further investigation. If children and families are questioning the value or merit of basic education, for example, there may be less incentive for children to continue their studies on their own volition. Understanding this potential issue in a more detailed way may help to improve the delivery of basic education, and in doing so, could contribute to the government’s aim of universal enrolment and completion—and ultimately, improved learning outcomes.

Findings from this case study of limited geographical scope must not be generalised to the national context. What the themes identified from this project can do, however, is to provide points for broader discussion into the ways in which national policy is experienced and understood by some of Rwanda’s most important stakeholders in the education sector: young people themselves. Study findings can give policymakers and education-focussed programmes pause to consider what can be gained from considering the perspective of young people and what it adds to the way the education system is operating on the ground.

A number of developing-country contexts grapple with extending and expanding access whilst maintaining a reasonable amount of quality in accordance with broader commitments

<sup>24</sup> ICAI (2012), Abbott et al (2015), Pells et al (2014). <sup>25</sup> MINEDUC (2013: 25).



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