

The Image of School in the Experiences of Malagasy Senior Secondary School Students and Graduates

Obraz szkoły w doświadczeniach malgaskich uczniów i absolwentów liceów

Kinga Lendzion

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński
University in Warsaw,
Poland

ORCID

0000-0003-2809-0565

k.lendzion@uksw.edu.pl

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Abstract: In this article, the author presents the results of a qualitative study conducted among Malagasy senior secondary school students and graduates of the senior secondary school last year. The purpose of the individual in-depth interviews conducted was to reconstruct their educational history. During the analysis of the collected data using Atlas.ti software, a new theme emerged alongside the main one, namely, the image of school in the respondents' statements. This theme was classified as a separate family of codes, within which three subgroups were distinguished: teachers, peer relationships and students. The respondents' statements indicate that discipline plays a vital role in Malagasy schools, enabling students, in their view, to achieve educational success. The school is also an essential catalyst for social integration with peers in the surrounding area. In addition to individual successes, respondents valued the collective celebration of school events. Both final-year senior secondary school students and senior secondary school graduates expressed their disapproval of school dropouts and of teachers with low pedagogical competence.

Keywords: education system, social world of school, students, teachers, peer relationships, Madagascar

Abstrakt: W artykule autorka prezentuje wyniki badań jakościowych, przeprowadzonych wśród uczniów ostatnich klas oraz absolwentów liceów. Celem przeprowadzonych indywidualnych wywiadów pogłębionych było odtworzenie ich historii edukacji. W trakcie analizy zgromadzonych danych przy użyciu oprogramowania Atlas.ti obok głównego wątku wyłonił się nowy – obraz szkoły w wypowiedziach badanych. Temat ten został zakwalifikowany jako odrębna rodzina kodów, w której wyróżniono trzy podgrupy kodów: nauczyciele, relacje z rówieśnikami oraz uczniowie. Z wypowiedzi badanych wynika, że w malgaskiej szkole istotną rolę pełni dyscyplina, dzięki której w opinii badanych uczniowie mogą osiągnąć sukces edukacyjny. Szkoła stanowi też ważne miejsce jako katalizator integracji społecznej z rówieśnikami z okolicznych miejscowości. Oprócz indywidualnych sukcesów badani cenili wspólne celebrowanie wydarzeń szkolnych. Uczniowie, jak i absolwenci z dezaprobatą wypowiadali się na temat osób, które porzuciły szkołę oraz nauczycieli o niskich kompetencjach pedagogicznych.

Słowa kluczowe: system edukacji, społeczny świat szkoły, uczniowie, nauczyciele, relacje rówieśnicze, Madagaskar



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INTRODUCTION

Christian missionaries initiated the formal school system in African countries and later took over and were regulated by the colonial administration. In Madagascar, the first school was established in 1820 in the royal palace in Antananarivo at the behest of King Radama I (1810-1828) by British missionaries David Jones and David Griffiths of the London Missionary Society. It is worth noting that after initial instruction in English, within just a few years, thanks to the codification and standardisation of the Malagasy language, instruction was conducted in the native language. In subsequent years, thanks to the king's support, some 12,000 children studied in schools established by Christian missionaries, and by 1826, approximately 4,000 of them could read and write in Malagasy. The development of Malagasy education was halted in 1895 with the French conquest of Madagascar and the subsequent imposition of a colonial regime in 1905 (Lendzion 2019, 87-90; Dahl 2011, 53-54).

During the colonial period, the aim of schooling – consistent with France's active policy of assimilation – was to educate “good” craftsmen or lower-level functionaries within the colonial system. By promoting Eurocentric values, including materialism and individualism, schools uprooted students from their native culture (Randriamanantena 2009, 5; Lendzion 2015, 220). After regaining independence in 1960, Madagascar, like many other Sub-Saharan African countries, adopted the language of the former coloniser as its official language. This decision meant that education at all levels continued to be delivered in French. The choice was driven, on the one hand, by the absence of textbooks and curricula prepared in Malagasy, and on the other, by the conviction among decision-makers of the time that the native language was of little value and that education conducted in a Western language was superior. It was also significant that the Malagasy elites who assumed power in the country had been educated in colonial schools, which had instilled in them a “colonial mentality” (Ralibera 2006, 144-154; Lendzion 2020, 381-394).

After independence, education in the Malagasy language at all levels was offered only during the period of the Second Malagasy Republic (1975-1992) and the policy of so-called “Malagasisation” of the country. Unfortunately, this was an unsuccessful attempt, which led to a dramatic decline in the quality of education in public schools; one of its consequences is the high rate of illiteracy among today's 40- to 50-year-olds.¹ During the Third Democratic Republic of Madagascar, the 1992 education reform introduced the so-called early exit transitional bilingual programmes, which entailed instruction in French from the fourth grade of primary

¹ Malagasisation – in the sphere of education – meant the introduction of instruction in the Malagasy language at all levels of schooling. The absence of curricula in Malagasy, the lack of textbooks, and insufficient financial resources for this purpose had disastrous consequences for the education of the generation of students affected by this policy. It is estimated that approximately 54% of the population was illiterate, and only 35% of school-age children attended school. Moreover, only one in a thousand students who began their education during this period successfully completed the upper-secondary school-leaving examination (see also: Lendzion 2019, 95-100; Dahl 2011, 51-80).

school. A subsequent reform in 2008 extended education in the native Malagasy language throughout the entire first stage of schooling, introducing French as the language of instruction only from the lower secondary level – the so-called late exit transitional bilingual programmes (Randriamarotsimba 2014, 136-137).

Today, the education system in Madagascar comprises three years of preschool preparation, five years of primary education (grades 1-5), and secondary education – four years of junior secondary school (grades 6-9) and three years of senior secondary school (grades 10-12 and the terminale class) or four-year vocational schools. At the primary and junior secondary school level, instruction is described as bilingual, while in senior secondary school, instruction is conducted only in French. Each stage of education concludes with an examination and, upon successful completion, the award of a certificate for the respective level of education: the CEPE (Primary School Leaving Certificate), the BEPC (Lower Secondary School Leaving Certificate), and either the upper-secondary school-leaving examination or the BEP (Vocational Education Certificate).

Unfortunately, the quality of education in Malagasy schools is very low. According to 2019 data, the gross school enrolment rate for primary school was 134%, the net enrolment rate was 94.9%, while the completion rate was 63.3%. For junior secondary school, the rates are even poorer, with gross and net enrolment rates of 34.6% and 27.5%, respectively. One in five primary school pupil (22.2%) repeats a year. Only a negligible proportion of young people continue to higher education; in 2020, the gross enrolment rate was a mere 5.5% (Gouëdard 2023, 13-15). The low rates of primary school completion and transition to junior secondary school stem from poor-quality education. According to a 2019 assessment of educational quality conducted in the Francophone Sub-Saharan African countries by the PASEC research team, in Madagascar only 17.5% of pupils in the final year of primary school achieved a sufficient level of reading competence (the average across participating countries was 48%), and 26.5% achieved a sufficient level of competence in mathematics (the average across participating countries was 38%) (PASEC 2020, 80).

One of the contributing factors to the low quality of education in Malagasy schools, alongside curricula that are poorly adapted to socio-cultural realities and the use of French as the language of instruction from the lower secondary level onward (see also: Lendzion 2019, 63-118), is the low level of teacher competence, both pedagogical and subject-specific, in the areas they teach (Gouëdard 2023, 141). It is worth noting that Madagascar, like other African countries, suffers from a shortage of qualified teachers. Faced with staffing shortages, the Malagasy government adopted several measures that have impacted the quality of education. Most importantly, the minimum qualification required for teaching in schools is completion of secondary school education. Another measure, first introduced as early as 1975, permits teachers to be hired and remunerated by schools' Parents' Associations operating within schools. These so-called FRAM teachers constituted

60% of all teachers in 2021.² Often, the only condition for their employment is their agreement to work at school³ (IIPÉ-UNESCO 2020, 11-22; Gouédard 2023, 16). According to data from the Ministry of National Education, in 2020, as many as 83% of teachers lacked pedagogical education. Most qualified teachers work in urban areas in the central part of the island, and they are more frequently employed in junior and senior secondary schools than in primary schools. Consequently, in the poorest rural regions of the country, the proportion of teachers holding a teaching diploma does not exceed 3% (Safin 2024, 7-10).

The low level of education among Malagasy teachers is further evidenced by the PASEC findings mentioned above. Compared with other sub-Saharan African countries participating in the study, only 11.2% of Malagasy primary school teachers achieved the highest level of competence in reading comprehension, and 24% in mathematical competence. Moreover, in both assessed domains, teachers in Madagascar obtained didactic competence scores below the average of teachers from the participating countries, which may translate into difficulties in analysing pupils' behaviour and selecting appropriate teaching methods. These results indicate that many Malagasy teachers lack both the basic pedagogical skills and the didactic competences necessary to ensure an adequate quality of education (PASEC 2020, 175-190; Gouédard 2023, 13-15).

Despite the low quality of education provided by schools in Madagascar, many Malagasy parents regard their children's schooling as the only opportunity for them to escape poverty.⁴ Research findings confirm this perception. In 2022, the poverty rate among illiterate individuals was 97%, compared with 83.5% among those who had completed primary education. Among those who had completed secondary education, the poverty rate was twice as low, at 46%, and among those with higher education, it fell to just 17% (Oviedo and Mulangu 2024). It is worth noting that in Sub-Saharan African countries, education has been viewed since colonial times as a key mechanism of social mobility. The level of education achieved determines an individual's life chances (Akyeampong and Adzahlie-Mensah 2018, 197).

1. THEORETICAL CONTEXT – THE SOCIAL WORLD OF THE SCHOOL

Within the interactionist paradigm, the school is defined as a space of interaction and of situational definition, in which students and teachers reflectively adjust their actions both to the formal institutional requirements and to their own expectations. Piotr Mikiewicz distinguishes three social realities within the world of the school. The first is the world of students, within which they develop shared definitions of school

² The name derives from the name of the association Fikambanan'ny ray aman-drenin'ny mpianatra.

³ There are cases in which FRAM teachers working in rural primary schools have completed only lower-secondary education, having passed the BEPC examination.

⁴ Madagascar is among the poorest countries in the world. According to the *Madagascar Poverty Assessment Report*, in 2022, 72.9% of the population lived in poverty (with the rate reaching 80.6% in rural areas and 42.2% in urban areas), including 51.8% living in extreme poverty (56.7% in rural areas and 42.2% in urban areas) (World Bank 2024, 4-5).

situations, interpret the behavioural rules and school duties imposed upon them by the institution, and negotiate their meaning. The second is the sphere of teachers, in which, through informal interaction, educators construct definitions of their professional reality in three dimensions: their perceptions of students and their social background, their attitudes towards the school and its ethos, as well as the approaches they adopt in their work with students. The third is the world of the classroom, a space where the first two spheres – the world of students and the world of teachers – intersect, and where each side, through different strategies, seeks to impose its own vision of the school and thus its own rules (Mikiewicz 2008, 88-90).

By adopting the definition of the school as a “social world,” we assume that although its participants are not passive actors and negotiate definitions of situations in their everyday interactions within the school environment, they nevertheless operate within specific institutional and territorial frameworks. The school as an institution forms part of a broader social system which, from a functionalist-structural perspective, imposes certain functional requirements upon it. Both students and teachers have defined social roles and fulfil the responsibilities associated with them. Conceptualising the school as a “social world” therefore offers a holistic view of its daily functioning in its formal, social, and cultural dimensions. It allows us to reveal the interweaving of structural requirements with the definitions of situations constructed by students and teachers, and to connect positivist and constructivist approaches (Mikiewicz 2008, 91).

At this point, it is also worth referring to Margaret Archer and her critical realist perspective, which analyses the education system from both macro- and micro-level standpoints. According to Archer, understanding the origins and explaining the principles governing an education system in a given country requires drawing upon her morphogenetic approach, within which she identifies four phases: structural conditioning (phase T1), social interaction (phases T2–T3), and structural elaboration (phase T4). A detailed analysis and description of the initial structural context (T1) are essential for understanding and explaining the motives behind the actions undertaken by social actors in phase T2. “This step back provides the source of motives, ‘taken-for-granted positions,’ ideological commitments, adopted strategies, and above all it reveals what the actors wanted (and often more importantly, what they did not want) strongly enough to motivate them to engage in (educational) interaction. This cannot be understood without introducing the prior structural context which ‘conditioned’ the interaction between phases T1 and T2” (Archer 2015, 21). From this perspective, the past and the future are at work in the present, shaping the actions of social actors. It must therefore be assumed that student–teacher relations are conditioned by the historical context of the development of a country’s education system. What we observe is a series of feedback loops, the result of which is the presence of the past within the present (phase T4) (Archer 1981, 280-281).

The shape and functioning of the contemporary education system in Madagascar, as in other Sub-Saharan African countries, have been significantly

influenced by colonial policy and the education system introduced during the colonial period, which subsequently shaped the political elites responsible for developing educational policy in independent states. The devaluation of indigenous culture within the colonial education system fostered in African societies the belief that education modelled on European systems possessed greater value. Consequently, contemporary education systems in Sub-Saharan Africa are, in most cases, formal school systems inherited from colonial administrations, which, aside from minor adjustments, have not undergone comprehensive reforms that would align them with the socio-cultural contexts of developing states. Curricular content, social relations, and structural vectors of power continue to be preserved, meaning that schools maintain colonial modes of regulation, discipline, and the marginalisation of local knowledge and languages. As a result, for many young Africans, schooling does not necessarily constitute a positive experience, and the days spent within school walls have not always been – and are still not – “the happiest” of their lives (Akyeampong and Adzahlie-Mensah 2018, 198-199).

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sub-Saharan Africa has one of the youngest populations in the world. Approximately 70% of its inhabitants are children and young people under the age of 30 (Ichikowitz Family Foundation 2020). According to estimates, nearly 60% of Madagascar’s population is under the age of 25, and the median age is 21.3 years (The World Factbook 2024). Although young people constitute the majority of Africa’s population, there is still a notable shortage of studies that focus specifically on this age group. In particular, there is a lack of qualitative research which, by giving voice to young people, allows the reconstruction of the world as seen and experienced from their perspective. Listening to young people through the use of qualitative methods – ethnographic research or in-depth individual interviews – makes it possible to discern the “subtle dimensions of their experiences” that cannot be captured by quantitative datasets (Kurian and Singal 2021, 3-6; Carter et al. 2023, 519).

In order to reconstruct the educational histories of Malagasy students and to examine school experiences from their perspective, I conducted in-depth individual interviews with 15 final-year senior secondary school students and senior secondary school graduates who had completed school and passed the upper-secondary school-leaving examination not earlier than one year before they participated in the study. The interviews were carried out in two locations: the town of Miandrivazo, the administrative centre of a district in the central-western part of the island (10 interviews, including 5 with final-year senior secondary school students and 5 with senior secondary school graduates), and the large city of Fianarantsoa, the capital of a province located in the central part of the island (5 interviews with final-year senior secondary school students). The participants were between 17 and 25 years of age. The selection of research sites stemmed from the fact that I had previously conducted studies in both locations and was

already recognised there, which enabled me to gain access to the selected schools and to find individuals willing to participate in interviews. In Miandrivazo, I had conducted several rounds of field research in local schools – including both survey studies and focus group interviews with senior secondary school students and teachers. My contact with students and graduates in Fianarantsoa had been more indirect: through an acquaintance, I had previously asked them to write essays about their educational histories. In total, I received 56 essays. The findings from the content analysis of those essays inspired me to undertake further field research, the results of which are presented in this article.

The material collected during the interviews is exceptionally rich and deepens the data obtained in my earlier research. The transcripts of individual interviews were processed using Atlas.ti software. During the analysis of the collected data, alongside the primary theme – the reconstruction of the educational histories of the participating students and graduates – a new and compelling theme emerged: the image of the school in the participants' accounts, which forms the focus of the subsequent part of this article. In narrating their educational histories, the young people spoke about teachers, relationships with school peers, and both positive and negative school experiences. This theme was classified as a separate code family, within which three subgroups of codes were distinguished: teachers, peer relations, and students.

3. DISCIPLINE AND PERSEVERANCE AS SYNONYMS OF MALAGASY EDUCATION – ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEWS

a. Teachers

It is understandable that, when recounting their educational histories, students spoke extensively about teachers. The theme of teachers emerged spontaneously during the interviews, most often when participants described the difficulties they had encountered in learning. The primary criticism voiced by the interviewees concerned the teachers' low pedagogical competence and their limited ability to convey knowledge effectively – an assessment consistent with the earlier cited PASEC findings regarding the competencies of Malagasy teachers. Respondents complained that teachers were unable to explain subject matter clearly. As a result, students did not acquire the necessary knowledge and made mistakes. “There was a problem at school because the teachers – even in a non-public senior secondary school – did not explain anything, they did not write lessons on the board, they only dictated. So, the children often made mistakes because they did not understand anything; they wrote things down incorrectly... and, as children do, many of them simply gave up when teachers only dictated and did not explain” (Lalina, graduate, Miandrivazo). “This teacher explained things badly, he didn't know how to explain, and we didn't understand anything. Then he expected us to solve tasks, but we couldn't do them” (Francis, final-year student, Miandrivazo).

According to the students, many Malagasy teachers, in addition to lacking pedagogical and subject-specific competence, also demonstrate a lack of

professional diligence. The most frequently cited descriptions of teachers' attitudes included: "they do not take their work seriously," "they do not make an effort," and "they do not care about teaching us anything." One interviewee recounted that his teacher in a rural school attended classes only at the beginning of the school year and was absent for most of the remaining time. Moreover, teachers regularly employed various "disciplinary" measures – shouting, physical punishment, or expelling entire classes from lessons. "When he entered the classroom and noticed that even one person was talking, he threw all of us out of the classroom, and we did not return to the lesson" (Josephin, graduate, Miandrivazo).

– "I didn't like our teacher (in primary school)..."

- Why?

- She was mean.

- What do you mean by 'mean'?

- She often beat the pupils..." (Richard, graduate, Miandrivazo).

Unfortunately, the use of violent disciplinary practices is characteristic of the education systems of many postcolonial Sub-Saharan African countries (Akyeampong and Adzahlie-Mensah 2018).

According to respondents, the problem of low teacher competence affects both public and non-public schools, although complaints more frequently concerned teachers in public schools. Students also emphasised clear differences in teachers' working methods in primary schools, junior secondary schools and senior secondary schools. They often highlighted the higher qualifications and greater professional experience of teachers working at higher levels of education, which corresponds with the research findings cited earlier. In the respondents' view, teachers at the senior secondary level treat students more seriously and place significantly higher demands on them: "Teachers in senior secondary school are different from those in primary school; teachers in primary school, junior secondary, and senior secondary school are really not the same... they have different diplomas. Teachers are no longer so close to the students, they are not 'with' the students the way they are in primary school, and that is the difference" (Onzu, final-year student, Fianarantsoa).

What, then, characterises a good or bad teacher according to the interviewed final-year senior secondary school students and senior secondary school graduates? A good teacher is, above all, someone who can explain subject matter clearly and spark students' interest in the subject. After the lesson, the student understands the material and can repeat it. Moreover, a good teacher is "close to the students"; supportive, understanding, and able to establish positive relationships with them. By contrast, a bad teacher is someone who cannot convey knowledge effectively, shows no interest in students' well-being, behaves maliciously, and uses punitive measures. "In primary school, the teachers I liked were mainly those who knew how to pass on their knowledge to the students, who were not too strict (...), so I liked teachers with experience in education, who knew how to convey the knowledge they had" (Onzu, final-year student, Fianarantsoa). "A bad teacher is

someone who does not know how to teach, who is not interested in the students' future, who is malicious" (Alfred, graduate, Miandrivazo).

It is important to emphasise, however, that a good and supportive teacher does not mean an indulgent one. In the respondents' view, a good teacher is demanding and, when necessary, even strict. Such a teacher is capable of disciplining students and motivating them to study. As a result of their work, students have no difficulty progressing to the next grade or passing examinations, and they feel encouraged to acquire knowledge. Furthermore, the subjects taught by good teachers tend to be liked by students, whereas poor, incompetent teachers discourage learning and, in the African context, contribute to students' dropping out of school. Research conducted among Rwandan secondary school students shows that, similarly to Malagasy students, they value teachers who are committed to the teaching process, are experts in their subject, can convey knowledge effectively, are disciplined, and punctual. Students expect teachers to be approachable and understanding – to embody a "culture of care." A "good teacher" positively influences students' engagement in learning, raises their sense of self-worth, offers hope for a "better future," and makes students "work hard and succeed academically" (Carter et al. 2023, 528-529).

b) Peer Relationships at School

The school is a site of intensive peer interaction, both during learning activities and recreational time. In interviews with final-year senior secondary school students and senior secondary school graduates, both positive and negative experiences related to peer relationships within the school environment were reported. Positive accounts referred primarily to cooperation among students, mutual help, and academic support. Respondents emphasised that, in many cases, classmates were the only individuals who supported them in their studies: Interviewees emphasised that, often, the only people who helped them with their studies were their classmates. "I didn't mention it earlier, but here we help each other. I am good at physics, so I help him, and he helps me. We help each other. And that is why I appreciate it; I like our cooperation" (Nancy, final-year student, Fianarantsoa).

Some interviewees spoke not only about collaboration in learning and supporting one another in difficult moments, but also about shared adolescent "misbehaviour," particularly during their teenage years: "Almost all of us did stupid, bad things. We were drawn to them... we skipped classes, and some also smoked and drank" (Alfred, graduate, Miandrivazo).

From the participants' accounts, it may be inferred that the school serves as an important space that catalyses social integration with peers from neighbouring villages. In the interviews, students and graduates mentioned, in addition to individual achievements, shared class experiences as their most positive school memories. They described school celebrations, the enjoyment of participating in them, sporting competitions, and the collective joy when everyone successfully passed examinations or advanced to the next grade. The joy derived from these shared accomplishments stems not only from individual satisfaction in

contributing to a collective achievement but also from the deeply rooted Malagasy concept of *fihavanana*, which denotes group solidarity. Like many other Africans, Malagasy people derive fulfilment from living within a community (Egbekpalu 2023). “And in the final year (of lower secondary school ed.), in the third grade, 5 we achieved 100% on the BEPC examination for the first time. We were the first in our school to reach 100% – everyone passed. Our headmistress and all the teachers were astonished; everyone was astonished that we had managed it, that we passed. I do not know if it was a miracle or what, I really do not know, but all of us succeeded in our school, and everyone passed. It was just amazing” (Nancy, final-year student, Fianarantsoa). “There were no problems; I have many good memories from school. From junior secondary school I have many memories, good memories. We played football, we had a team, and we almost always won, and we won a trophy; that trophy and the photo are still displayed in my house as a keepsake” (Josephin, graduate, Miandrivazo).

Although most participants perceived school as a place of positive peer relationships, some unfortunately experienced exclusion from the class group and instances of public humiliation. These experiences primarily affected students from very poor families. Similar negative peer dynamics in schools were reported by working adolescent students (aged 10-14) in studies conducted, for example, in Ethiopia (Woodhead 1998, 68). It is important to note that the respondents encountered negative peer relations in both public and non-public schools. “Apart from that, the hardest thing for me in Grade 7 was... because the children made me suffer, I felt hurt. They laughed at me, joked about me, and often humiliated me because I was poor; they laughed at my situation” (Charline, graduate, Miandrivazo).

In one interview, the respondent mentioned being perceived as “alien” or “different.” Referring to Malagasy culture and the persistent caste and ethnic divisions within Malagasy society, it may be inferred that the source of his exclusion was not poverty alone but also belonging to a different ethnic group from the majority of students in the class:⁶ “As for my classmates, they were just like the teachers. Their parents could afford to pay the school fees and so on. The students said, ‘You are nobody, you are worthless.’ They made fun of me and humiliated me. ‘You are poor; you are not like us’” (Lalaina, graduate, Miandrivazo).

c) Students

From the participants’ accounts of their educational histories, there also emerges an image of the “student”. According to the interviewees, a good student is, above all, someone focused on learning. Such a student is disciplined, complies with

⁵ The grade structure in the Malagasy education system is as follows: primary school – Grades 11 to 7; junior secondary school – Grades 6 to 3; senior secondary school – Grades 2 to 1, followed by the final-year, the *terminale* class.

⁶ There are 18 ethnic groups in Madagascar. During the colonial period, the authorities, applying a “divide and rule” strategy, forced the migration of particular groups – a process that continues to this day (See also: Lendzion 2019).

school regulations, and pursues their goals with perseverance. Through sustained effort, good students achieve educational success – they progress to subsequent grades and pass final examinations. “Our headmistress really wants to have the best results. And I can see what she does, and it is really good – her methods are very logical. If students really concentrate on learning, I am sure that our school will definitely achieve good results, the best results. We just need a bit of time, a bit of concentration, and that’s all” (Nancy, final-year student, Fianarantsoa).

In the interviewees’ narratives, the term most frequently used to describe a good student was “mature.” In their view, one does not become a “mature student” immediately. Primary school – especially the early grades (or preschool in the case of the few who attended) – is a period during which children are introduced to formal learning and gradually begin to understand that the primary purpose of attending school is not play, but the acquisition of knowledge. This requires students to adapt to the rules governing school life. “I remember when my mother took me to school, and everyone, all my classmates, were crying. However, I did not cry. However, when I saw that everyone was crying, I also began to cry. I remember, I really remember what it was like, and I still remember how I told my mum, ‘Go to work now, because I’m going to learn. The teacher is here already.’ Suddenly, I was ready. I was ready to work, ready to learn” (Nancy, final-year student, Fianarantsoa). “In primary school, my classmates... generally, students in primary school are still a bit stubborn, but over time they become more mature (...) Unfortunately, some students left school because they broke the rules... they were too stubborn...” (Onzu, final-year student, Fianarantsoa).

According to the respondents, a “bad student” is undisciplined, unfocused on learning, and preoccupied with activities other than acquiring knowledge. While a relaxed attitude toward learning may still be tolerated in primary school, it is viewed negatively in junior secondary and senior secondary schools. Adolescence is considered a challenging period, when students begin experimenting with alcohol or other substances. “In Grades 4 and 3 (of lower secondary school ed.) there were problems in the class. Students were undisciplined during lessons, they talked, some left the school grounds to drink alcohol” (Francis, final-year student, Miandrivazo).

It is important to emphasise that both the interviewed final-year senior secondary school students and senior secondary school graduates offered a very harsh self-assessment. They did not attribute their educational failures to educational conditions – such as unqualified teachers, overcrowded classrooms, or the use of French as the language of instruction. Instead, they openly stated that they performed poorly because they were insufficiently focused on their studies, had problems with concentration or memory, or considered themselves not intelligent enough. “I started in a public school, but at the beginning I had problems. I had problems with remembering things, with perception, with understanding, with intelligence in general, so my parents changed my school to the Sisters’ school. And the Sisters moved me back one grade, to a lower grade...” (Lalina, graduate, Miandrivazo).

The interviewees attributed their educational successes primarily to their own engagement in learning. In their view, they progressed through the education system successfully above all thanks to their perseverance and consistent pursuit of their goal, namely, completing school and obtaining an education. For Malagasy students, “hard work” is synonymous with “gaining education,” much as it is for many other African students. This stems above all from a perceived lack of support in the educational process and from uncertainty regarding their future. Not knowing what opportunities may be available to them after completing successive educational stages, students regard the single certain course of action as studying, “working hard,” in the hope that it may yield tangible benefits in the future (Andriariniaina 2017). As research indicates, poor educational outcomes in African schools cannot be explained by a lack of motivation or effort on the part of students (Camfield 2011). Most African students pursue their goals with determination: “But I made an important decision, because I had my goal: to fulfil my dreams. My family is very poor, so I want to save them, to help them. I want to save them, because I decided to make an effort in my life to improve our situation. That is why I continued my studies” (Alfred, graduate, Miandrivazo).

According to the respondents, children and young people who did not attend school or who dropped out were, in most cases, themselves to blame – due to a lack of prudence, laziness, or an aversion to the school discipline discussed earlier. “My brothers were too lazy to go to school, but I, I wanted to go to school... they didn’t want to go. I live in a small village... in Tandila, and there were many pupils there” (Josephin, graduate, Miandrivazo).

It should be emphasised that all my interviewees spoke from the standpoint of students who had achieved educational success – success that is by no means self-evident given the low quality of education in Malagasy schools. Attending the final year of senior secondary school – and even more so, being a senior secondary school graduate – constitutes a significant accomplishment. It seems that, in their view, entering and continuing education at successive stages, despite the many difficulties they faced, is something obvious and expected. The respondents spoke critically of peers who did not start school at all or discontinued their education for various reasons: “In Grade 2 (of senior secondary school ed.) there were a few friends who left school and decided to get married and meet other people. And I was, and all my other friends were, surprised. What did she do? What did they do? There were also others who were already in Grade 1, who were supposed to take the final exams the following year... and they decided to get married. As a result, one of my classmates is already pregnant, others already have two children, while we do not have any yet. Many of those who moved up from Grade 7 all the way to the terminale class (from the last year of junior secondary school to the last year of senior secondary school ed.) are already married; they left school, and some already have children. Many live here, but others live in different regions. We were very surprised. What a surprise! What did they – what did she – do? There is one person, one classmate, who was a sensible person, who did something like this, and it was really surprising, it was astonishing...” (Nancy, final-year student, Fianarantsoa).

CONCLUSIONS

The formal education system in Madagascar – established with the founding of the first school in the royal palace in the nineteenth century and later promoted by the colonial administration – has remained, up to the present day, an important mechanism of social mobility. The possibility of upward mobility through education motivates students to work diligently, thereby legitimising the strict discipline characteristic of Malagasy schools. Students do not question this discipline, even when they are afraid of certain teachers. In their view, discipline helps them focus more effectively on learning and thus achieve better educational outcomes. Those who, in the eyes of the respondents, failed to “mature” into the role of a student due to inappropriate behaviour and were expelled, or who gave up, discontinued their education, and chose an alternative path – such as starting a family early – are perceived negatively. According to the interviewees, such individuals forfeited their chance to improve their living conditions. Also evaluated negatively are undisciplined students and teachers who do not perform their duties conscientiously and who lack pedagogical competence.

From the accounts of the final-year senior secondary school students and senior secondary school graduates, there emerges a certain image of the Malagasy school. Discipline occupies an important place, and in the respondents’ view, it functions as an effective educational strategy because it eliminates undesirable behaviours at school – such as talking during lessons or engaging in “teenage mischief.” The school’s task is to transmit knowledge and to educate the younger generation, teaching them the norms of proper conduct. As the interviews show, young people expect to acquire in school the basic competencies of good citizenship. “Education is important in my life; firstly, because it develops me intellectually, my intellectual abilities. It is important that I am studying in a Catholic school – and that matters, because this school not only develop us intellectually but also shapes our behaviour. The school teaches behaviour, teaches what is good and what is bad; it is not only intellectual education but also learning how to be a good citizen... now and when we are adults” (Onzu, final-year student, Fianarantsoa).

The school is also a key site of student integration. Students enjoy spending time together, particularly organising shared class events, sports competitions, and school celebrations. It is important to emphasise that students support one another in their learning. In the context of teachers’ low pedagogical competence and the limited educational attainment of parents (some of whom are illiterate), students often have no one to rely on but themselves. In Malagasy schools, competition among students is largely absent; instead – consistent with the previously mentioned notion of *fiavanana* – cooperation and a shared pursuit of the goal of completing school predominate. Naturally, alongside collaboration, instances of exclusion also occur. As noted earlier, it is therefore worth examining the roots of such discrimination among students – whether it stems from extreme poverty or from deeply entrenched inter-ethnic divisions.

The quality of education in schools in Madagascar, as in other Sub-Saharan African countries, leaves much to be desired. Despite the numerous difficulties African students encounter throughout their educational journeys, some persevere and successfully complete successive stages of schooling. Their determination is driven by the belief that through their own hard work they will achieve success that will compensate for the effort invested. Qualitative research – including, among other methods, individual interviews – makes it possible to view the education system from the perspective of its participants, young people, thereby offering valuable insights for policymakers responsible for shaping national curricula in particular countries.

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