

REVIEWER'S REPORT

Manuscript No.: IJAR-59581

Title: Mental Health in Congolese Schools: From Legal Fiction to Stakeholder Improvisation, Institutionalization in Search of Meaning

Rating

Recommendation: Accept after Major revision

Rating	Excel.	Good	Fair	Poor
Originality		Yes		
Techn. Quality		Yes		
Clarity			Yes	
Significance		Yes		

Reviewer's ID: JPR-212

Detailed Reviewer's Report

The manuscript examines the systemic divide between the legislative ambitions of Congolese schools and conditions on the ground marked by structural precarity. Although the 1995 Education Act and the 2022-2026 National Health Development Plan position psychological well-being as a driver of educational success, the study argues that this institutionalization amounts to a legal fiction. Drawing on the neo-institutionalist framework of Meyer and Rowan (1977), the research identifies substantial decoupling, whereby the institution adopts international standards through superficial isomorphism to secure external legitimacy without transforming actual practices. A qualitative investigation involving eighteen key stakeholders reveals that this decoupling is reflected in a complete absence of budgetary provision and intermediary support structures. This vacuum forces teachers to engage in informal bricolage, an ethic of compensatory care reported in eighty-one percent of cases, which generates professional burnout and compassion fatigue. Without an official clinical framework, institutional silence gives way to mystical and religious interpretations of psychological disorders, reported in seventy-two percent of cases, perpetuating student stigmatization. The study recommends transforming Pedagogical Coordination Units into Spaces for Collaborative Development and Psychosocial Support, drawing on the ethics of care (Tronto, 1993) and experiential andragogy (Kolb, 1984).

2. Originality and Contribution

The paper addresses an important and under-researched topic, namely school mental health in the Republic of the Congo, and offers a theoretically informed analysis of the gap between legal prescriptions and frontline practice. The application of neo-institutionalist theory, particularly the concept of decoupling, to the Congolese

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education system is a genuinely valuable contribution. The study also contributes empirical evidence on the informal care work performed by teachers and on the sociocultural representations that shape responses to student distress.

The originality is therefore good. The paper moves beyond a simple policy critique by theorizing the mechanisms through which institutionalization fails and by documenting the adaptive strategies that emerge in the vacuum. The proposed model of institutional dissonance, presented in Figure 1, is a useful analytical synthesis. However, the originality could be further strengthened by more explicitly situating the findings in relation to the broader literature on school mental health in low-income and conflict-affected contexts, and by clarifying what the Congolese case contributes to theoretical debates on decoupling and isomorphism beyond confirming existing theory.

3. Technical Quality and Methodology

The methodology is generally sound and clearly described. The qualitative interpretive approach is appropriate for the research questions. The two-phase design, combining documentary analysis of the declared policy with semi-structured interviews, is well suited to examining the gap between prescription and practice. The purposive sampling across three levels, macro-policy, meso-organizational, and micro-level, is logically justified and reflects the multi-level nature of the problem. The sample size of eighteen, justified by the principle of theoretical saturation, is acceptable for qualitative research of this kind. The ethical considerations are adequately addressed, including approval by the scientific committee, informed consent, anonymization through coding, and secure data storage. The use of source triangulation is appropriate.

However, several methodological weaknesses should be addressed. First, the paper does not provide the interview guide or specify the questions asked, which limits the reader's ability to assess the validity of the instrument. Second, the coding procedure is described only in general terms, and the paper does not explain how themes were derived, whether multiple coders were involved, or how inter-coder reliability was ensured. Third, the documentary analysis is described but the criteria for selecting documents and the method of semantic analysis are not fully specified. Fourth, the percentages reported in Table 3, such as one hundred percent, eighty-eight percent, eighty-one percent, and seventy-two percent, are presented as statistical weights, but with a sample of eighteen, these figures represent very small numbers of respondents, and the paper should be careful not to overstate their quantitative significance. Fifth, the paper does not discuss researcher positionality or how the researchers' own involvement in the Congolese education system may have influenced data collection and interpretation. Sixth, the paper does not discuss the limitations of relying on self-reported accounts of practice.

4. Clarity and Structure

The paper is generally well-structured, with a clear abstract, an introduction that sets out the problem and hypotheses, a theoretical framework, a methodology section, a

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results section, a discussion, and a conclusion with recommendations. The writing is sophisticated and the argument is coherent. The use of tables to summarize the regulatory corpus and the thematic saturation matrix is helpful.

However, there are several clarity and formatting issues. First, the abstract appears twice on the first two pages, which is a duplication error that should be corrected. Second, the section numbering is inconsistent, with section 2.3 appearing without a preceding section 2.1 or 2.2 in the visible numbering, and the results section beginning with section 3.1 without a clear introduction to section 3. Third, Table 1 is split awkwardly across pages, with the final row appearing alone on page eight, which should be corrected. Fourth, the reference list contains several inconsistencies and errors, including duplicate entries for Ryff (1989) and Deci and Ryan (2000), inconsistent formatting of author names, missing accents, and a misspelling of Meyer as Jhon rather than John. Fifth, the reference to Abernot (2013) and Dorier-Apprill (1995) appear in the reference list but are not cited in the text, while Tsoumou and Mayinguidi (2022) is cited in the reference list but does not appear in the text, suggesting incomplete integration. Sixth, the in-text citation of the authors' own work, Bakingu Bakibangou and Mouyele (2025), appears as a source note beneath the tables but is not included in the reference list, which should be corrected.

5. Significance and Relevance

The paper's significance is high. It addresses a neglected dimension of educational policy and practice in the Republic of the Congo and offers practical recommendations that are grounded in theory and evidence. The emphasis on the meso level, the missing intermediary structures such as school psychologists and social workers, is a valuable insight that has implications beyond the Congolese context. The recommendations regarding the transformation of Pedagogical Coordination Units and the development of an andragogy of care are concrete and potentially actionable.

However, the significance could be enhanced by a more explicit discussion of the transferability of the findings to other low-income and conflict-affected contexts, and by a more detailed consideration of the resource implications and feasibility of the proposed reforms. The paper also stops short of discussing how the recommendations might be implemented given the very structural constraints it identifies.

6. Use of Sources and References

The reference list is reasonably comprehensive and includes a mix of French and English sources. The theoretical sources, Meyer and Rowan, Tronto, Kolb, Ryff, Deci and Ryan, and Seligman, are appropriate and well integrated into the argument. The inclusion of Congolese official texts is valuable.

However, several issues should be addressed. First, as noted above, there are duplicate entries for Ryff (1989) and Deci and Ryan (2000), which should be consolidated. Second, several references contain formatting inconsistencies and typographical errors, including the misspelling of Meyer as Jhon, the inconsistent use of accents, and the inconsistent formatting of journal titles and volume numbers.

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Third, some references are incomplete, for example, the Akkari (2010) reference lacks page numbers and the Lefeuvre (2015) reference lacks full publication details. Fourth, the paper relies on a relatively limited number of empirical studies on school mental health in African contexts and could engage more with recent empirical literature. Fifth, the authors' own work, cited in the table source notes, should be included in the reference list.

7. Specific Comments and Suggestions

Abstract: The abstract is clear and well-written. However, it is duplicated on the first two pages, which should be corrected. The phrase stakeholder improvisation in the title appears to be a typographical error and should be corrected to improvisation.

Introduction: The introduction is well-argued and clearly sets out the problem, the hypotheses, and the objectives. It could be slightly condensed, but overall it is effective.

Theoretical Framework: The theoretical framework is well-developed and clearly explains how the concepts of mental health, well-being, and holistic development are connected. The integration of neo-institutionalism, positive psychology, self-determination theory, and the ethics of care is coherent.

Methodology: The methodology should be expanded to include the interview guide, a more detailed description of the coding procedure, and a discussion of researcher positionality. The percentages in Table 3 should be interpreted with caution given the small sample size.

Results: The results are well-presented and the verbatim quotations are used effectively to illustrate the themes. The thematic saturation matrix is a useful analytical tool. However, the presentation of percentages as statistical weights should be reconsidered, and the paper should be careful not to imply quantitative generalizability.

Discussion: The discussion is strong and effectively links the findings to the theoretical framework. The model of institutional dissonance in Figure 1 is a valuable synthesis. The discussion could be strengthened by a more explicit comparison with prior empirical studies on school mental health in similar contexts.

Conclusion and Recommendations: The conclusion is concise and the recommendations are concrete. However, the paper should discuss the feasibility and resource implications of the proposed reforms, given the structural constraints it identifies.

References: The reference list should be checked for duplicates, inconsistencies, and completeness. The authors' own work should be included in the reference list.

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Language and Style: The paper is generally well-written in English, but there are several typographical errors, for example, improvisation in the title, Jhon for John, and inconsistent use of accents in French references.

8. Recommendation

Recommendation: Minor Revision

The paper addresses an important and under-researched topic, is theoretically well-informed, and offers valuable empirical insights and practical recommendations. However, it requires revision to address the methodological, formatting, and referencing issues identified above. Key areas for improvement include:

1. Correcting the duplicated abstract and the typographical error in the title.
2. Expanding the methodology section to include the interview guide, coding procedure, and researcher positionality.
3. Interpreting the percentages in Table 3 with appropriate caution given the small sample size.
4. Correcting the inconsistencies and duplicates in the reference list and ensuring all cited works are included.
5. Discussing the feasibility and resource implications of the proposed reforms.

With these revisions, the paper could make a significant contribution to the literature on school mental health, educational policy, and institutional theory in African contexts.