



Leila Mpanga (second right) and Yasmin Katushabe (middle) founded Harmony International School to create an education model that goes beyond exams to prepare children for a changing world. PHOTO/COURTESY

How two women are rethinking school

Leila Mpanga and Yasmin Katushabe are transforming education at Harmony International School, focusing on life skills, critical thinking, and values beyond exams.

BY EDGAR R BATTE

Leila Mpanga trained as an engineer; Yasmin Katushabe as a communications expert. Together, they applied their professional experience to address a question they first asked as young mothers: What kind of education prepares a child for a future that keeps evolving?

Their answer was Harmony International School in Kansanga. At the time of the interview, the school is quiet. It is the holidays, and the rhythm of lessons has paused. Under a mango tree, they talk about how the school started and the philosophy that guides it.

Harmony opened in 2012 with just four children, mostly their own and those of staff. Within six months, enrolment had grown to 20. Growth was deliberate, focusing on systems, values, and purpose rather than scale or flashy infrastructure.

Foundations built on experience

Mpanga's engineering background, specialising in mechatronics, an interdisciplinary engineering field combining mechanical, electrical, computer, and software engineering, which gave her skills in systems thinking and problem-solving. Yet education entered her life much earlier: "My grandfather built community schools," she says. "I grew up visiting them with my father, interacting with learners and teachers. Education stayed with me." For Mpanga, education is about continuity and responsibility. She pursued engineering abroad but returned with the belief that both professions, engineering and education, could coexist. "I did not see it as a trade-off," she explains. "Engineering was an achievement; education was a calling."

Katushabe's path was different. With a background in communication, she understood how people learn and express ideas. Motherhood sharpened her focus; she wanted her children to gain skills that extended beyond academics, including confidence, creativity, and practical application. Schools that aligned with these values were either too expensive or too focused on grades.

"We saw children performing well on paper but struggling to adapt or express themselves," she says.

The two women met through a mutual connection, discussed their concerns, and decided to start a school reflecting their vision. Early years involved learning on the job, observing children, adjusting

PRIVATE SCHOOLS AND SHIFT BEYOND EXAMS

Uganda's private education sector has expanded steadily over the past two decades, driven by rising urban populations and parental demand for alternatives to government schools. Many private institutions compete on performance in national examinations, marketing high pass rates and visible infrastructure as markers of quality.

However, educators and policymakers increasingly acknowledge a broader challenge: how to prepare learners for a labour market shaped by technology, automation, and global competition. Discussions around competency-based learning, digital literacy, and soft skills, such as communication and critical thinking, have gained prominence.

While exams remain central to progression within Uganda's system, some schools are experimenting with blended curricula, project-based learning, and stronger parent partnerships in response to changing expectations.

practices, and refining systems. They began with early childhood education, believing strong foundations were essential.

Learning for a changing world

Today, Harmony serves children from six months to 12 years, offering both national and international curricula. Yet the founders view curriculum as a framework rather than the core focus. "What matters is what you do with it," Katushabe says. Education, they argue, should develop thinking, social skills, and adaptability, not just exam performance.

Exposure outside Uganda influenced their approach. While the Ugandan system fosters discipline and resilience, the founders observed that academic achievement alone does not ensure adaptability. Children may excel on tests but struggle with communication, creativity, and problem-solving.

"By the time our children are adults, some jobs may not exist," Mpanga notes. "Preparing learners solely for existing professions is no longer enough."

Harmony integrates life skills, creativity and critical thinking alongside academics. Children are encouraged to ask questions, collaborate, work with their hands, and reflect on values. Technology is used deliberately: ICT tools support learning, and students discuss global issues in clubs and structured discussions. Digital responsibility and ethics are emphasised alongside practical skills.

Values remain central. The school's phi-

losophy is grounded in faith and moral clarity, shaping leadership, discipline, and relationships. Teachers model respect, honesty, and responsibility. Parents are partners in education, creating a triangle of support: child, school, and home.

Clear roles

Running a school together for more than a decade has required clear roles and trust. Katushabe manages finance; Mpanga leads administration. Decisions are guided by principles, debated openly, and resolved collaboratively. Financial discipline is strict: Harmony has grown without commercial loans, reinvesting profits into the school rather than distributing them as personal income.

The founders have resisted competing on visible infrastructure or marketing. "We are building for the long term, not trends," Mpanga says. Many of their first learners are now in secondary school, yet families remain connected, reflecting the continuity the founders value.

Success, for them, is measured less in awards or rankings than in character. "We hear how our children interact and how they carry themselves. That tells us something is working," Katushabe says.

The school in essence, represents a deliberate response to a changing world. It prioritises adaptability, critical thinking, and ethical engagement, alongside academics. Mpanga and Katushabe aim to produce learners who can navigate uncertainty, think independently, and uphold values in their actions.