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Impact of Traditional Male Circumcision Practices on School Attendance: A Social Learning Theory Perspective from Buyinja Sub-County, Uganda

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Abstract

The study examined the impact of traditional male circumcision practices on school attendance among adolescent boys in Buyinja Sub-County, Uganda, through the lens of Social Learning Theory. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 187 respondents comprising students, parents, teachers, and cultural leaders. Results indicated that 73.8% of circumcised boys missed school for extended periods averaging 28 days, with 64.2% reporting diminished academic performance post-circumcision. Statistical analysis revealed a significant negative relationship ($r=-0.658$, $p<0.01$) between participation in traditional circumcision ceremonies and school attendance rates. Social Learning Theory constructs observational learning, reinforcement, and modeling significantly influenced boys' decisions to undergo circumcision despite educational disruptions. The study concluded that traditional male circumcision practices substantially disrupted formal education, with cultural learning mechanisms overriding educational considerations. Recommendations included integrating circumcision timing with school calendars, promoting medical circumcision during holidays, developing culturally sensitive school attendance policies, and establishing community-school partnerships to minimize educational interruptions while respecting cultural practices.

Keywords: Traditional male circumcision, school attendance, Social Learning Theory, cultural practices, adolescent education, Buyinja Sub-County

Background of the Study

Traditional male circumcision remained a deeply embedded cultural practice among several ethnic communities in Uganda, serving functions beyond physical modification to encompass identity formation, social integration, and transition to manhood (Wamai et al., 2011). In regions where circumcision was culturally mandated, the practice involved elaborate ceremonies, seclusion periods, and community-wide celebrations that could span several weeks (Bailey et al., 2007). While these rituals held significant cultural value, their timing and duration often coincided with school terms, creating tensions between cultural obligations and educational participation (Karamagi et al., 2019).

Buyinja Sub-County, located in the Bagisu-dominated region of Eastern Uganda, represented a context where traditional male circumcision, known locally as "Imbalu," constituted a non-negotiable rite of passage for boys typically between ages 14-18 (Heald, 2019). The biennial circumcision season attracted widespread community involvement, with uncircumcised boys facing social stigmatization and being considered incomplete or unworthy of adult privileges (Westercamp & Bailey, 2007). Consequently, adolescent boys participated in circumcision ceremonies regardless of potential educational consequences, often absenting themselves from school for extended periods during initiation, healing, and post-circumcision celebrations (Ntozi et al., 2011).

The intersection between traditional circumcision practices and formal education raised important questions about cultural preservation versus educational attainment. Research had documented that prolonged school

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absences negatively affected academic performance, increased dropout rates, and created learning gaps that disadvantaged affected students (UNESCO, 2018). In Uganda, where educational outcomes already faced challenges including resource constraints, teacher shortages, and poverty-related barriers, additional disruptions from cultural practices compounded existing educational inequities (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2020). However, attempts to discourage or reschedule circumcision ceremonies encountered resistance from communities who viewed such interventions as cultural imperialism and threats to indigenous identity (Munguti & Mutua, 2013).

Social Learning Theory, developed by Albert Bandura (1977), provided a valuable framework for understanding how traditional circumcision practices influenced adolescent behavior and decision-making regarding school attendance. The theory posited that individuals learned behaviors through observation, imitation, and modeling of others within their social environment, with learning mediated by cognitive processes and reinforced through rewards and punishments (Bandura, 1986). In the context of Buyinja Sub-County, boys observed older brothers, peers, and community members participating in circumcision ceremonies and receiving social approval, recognition, and elevated status. These observations, combined with cultural narratives emphasizing masculinity and belonging, reinforced the desirability of circumcision even when it conflicted with educational commitments (Silverman, 2004).

The application of Social Learning Theory illuminated how cultural knowledge about circumcision was transmitted across generations through modeling behaviors, verbal instruction from elders, symbolic communication through rituals, and social reinforcement mechanisms that rewarded conformity while sanctioning deviation (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Boys learned that successful completion of circumcision earned respect, marriage eligibility, and full community membership, while refusal or postponement brought shame, ridicule, and social exclusion (Mbonye et al., 2013). These powerful learning experiences created strong motivations to participate in circumcision ceremonies regardless of timing, often leading boys to prioritize cultural obligations over school attendance without fully considering long-term educational consequences (Brown et al., 2019).

Despite growing awareness of education's importance for individual and societal development, the impact of traditional male circumcision on school attendance in Buyinja Sub-County had not been adequately researched from a Social Learning Theory perspective. Understanding how cultural learning mechanisms influenced boys' decisions to absent themselves from school for circumcision ceremonies was essential for developing interventions that respected cultural values while minimizing educational disruptions. This study therefore examined the impact of traditional male circumcision practices on school attendance, exploring how Social Learning Theory constructs explained the relationship between cultural practices and educational participation among adolescent boys in Buyinja Sub-County.

Problem Statement

Traditional male circumcision ceremonies in Buyinja Sub-County caused significant disruptions to school attendance, with adolescent boys absenting themselves for periods ranging from three weeks to two months during initiation, seclusion, and post-circumcision celebrations (Buyinja Sub-County Education Report, 2021).

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These prolonged absences occurred primarily during regular school terms, resulting in missed instructional time, incomplete assessments, and learning gaps that disadvantaged affected students academically (Namulondo & Walakira, 2018).

Despite awareness of education's importance, boys continued to prioritize circumcision over school attendance due to powerful cultural learning processes that reinforced the practice's social value (Kasozi, 2020). Cultural leaders, family members, and community networks modeled behaviors that emphasized circumcision as essential to masculine identity and social acceptance, creating expectations that boys internalized and acted upon regardless of educational costs (Wanyama, 2019). Teachers reported that circumcised boys frequently returned to school with diminished academic performance, reduced motivation, and in some cases, never returned, having dropped out to pursue employment or early marriage (Buyinja District Education Office, 2020).

School administrators faced challenges addressing these absences because circumcision was culturally protected and attempts to discourage participation were perceived as disrespectful to indigenous traditions (Mukasa et al., 2021). The absence of systematic research examining how Social Learning Theory mechanisms influenced boys' decisions to miss school for circumcision ceremonies limited the development of culturally appropriate interventions. This study therefore investigated the impact of traditional male circumcision practices on school attendance from a Social Learning Theory perspective to inform strategies that balanced cultural preservation with educational continuity.

Specific Objective

To examine the impact of traditional male circumcision on school attendance rates.

Methodology

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods research design to investigate the impact of traditional male circumcision practices on school attendance in Buyinja Sub-County, Uganda. The design was appropriate because it allowed for collection and integration of both quantitative and qualitative data to provide comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative data established the extent and statistical relationships of circumcision-related absences, while qualitative data explored underlying cultural learning processes and contextual factors from a Social Learning Theory perspective (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

The study was conducted in Buyinja Sub-County, selected purposively due to its strong adherence to traditional male circumcision practices among the Bagisu ethnic community. The target population comprised secondary school students aged 14-20, parents of circumcised boys, teachers, head teachers, and cultural leaders who possessed knowledge about circumcision practices and their educational implications (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). Following Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table, a sample of 187 respondents was drawn from a total population of 310 potential participants. The sample included 102 students (65 circumcised and 37 uncircumcised), 40 parents, 30 teachers, 10 head teachers, and 5 cultural leaders, selected through stratified random sampling for students and teachers, and purposive sampling for parents and cultural leaders (Amin, 2005).

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Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires administered to students, teachers, and parents. The student questionnaire comprised four sections: demographic information, circumcision experiences, school attendance patterns, and Social Learning Theory constructs including observational learning, modeling, and reinforcement mechanisms (Bandura, 1986). A five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5) measured perceptions and attitudes. The teacher questionnaire assessed observations of attendance patterns, academic performance changes, and classroom behavior of circumcised versus uncircumcised students. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with cultural leaders and focus group discussions with selected students and parents to explore cultural meanings, learning processes, and decision-making regarding circumcision timing (Patton, 2015).

Instrument validity was established through expert review by three senior lecturers in educational psychology and anthropology at Makerere University, yielding a Content Validity Index (CVI) of 0.88 (Amin, 2005). Reliability testing was conducted through a pilot study with 25 respondents from neighboring Mbale District, producing Cronbach's Alpha coefficients of 0.86 for the school attendance scale and 0.84 for Social Learning Theory constructs scale (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Data collection occurred over eight weeks during the non-circumcision season to minimize disruptions. Ethical approval was obtained from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology, with additional permissions secured from district education offices and cultural leadership councils. All participants provided informed consent, with parental consent obtained for minor students (Mack et al., 2005).

Quantitative data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. Descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations summarized respondent characteristics and variable distributions (Pallant, 2016). Independent samples t-tests compared attendance rates between circumcised and uncircumcised students. Pearson's correlation coefficient determined relationships between circumcision participation and attendance rates, while multiple regression analysis examined Social Learning Theory constructs as predictors of attendance patterns (Field, 2018). Qualitative data were transcribed verbatim, coded thematically using NVivo 12 software, and analyzed through content analysis to identify patterns, themes, and illustrative quotations aligned with Social Learning Theory concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated during interpretation to provide comprehensive understanding of how traditional circumcision practices impacted school attendance (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Results

The study examined the impact of traditional male circumcision on school attendance among adolescent boys in Buyinja Sub-County. Findings are presented in tables with detailed interpretations integrating Social Learning Theory perspectives.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Student Respondents (N=102)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Circumcision Status	Circumcised	65	63.7%

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	Uncircumcised	37	36.3%
Age Range	14-16 years	48	47.1%
	17-18 years	39	38.2%
	19-20 years	15	14.7%
Class Level	Senior 1-2	41	40.2%
	Senior 3-4	44	43.1%
	Senior 5-6	17	16.7%

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The demographic characteristics presented in Table 1 revealed that 63.7% of student respondents had undergone traditional circumcision, reflecting the strong cultural adherence to this practice in Buyinja Sub-County. This high proportion aligned with anthropological research documenting near-universal circumcision rates among the Bagisu ethnic group (Heald, 2019). The age distribution showed that most respondents (47.1%) were aged 14-16 years, the typical age range for circumcision in this community (Westercamp & Bailey, 2007). The class level distribution indicated that circumcision occurred across all secondary school levels, with the highest concentration in Senior 3-4 (43.1%), suggesting that many boys underwent the practice during mid-secondary education when academic demands intensified.

Table 2: School Absence Patterns Related to Circumcision (N=65)

Absence Indicator	Frequency	Percentage	Mean Days	Std. Dev
Missed school for circumcision	48	73.8%	28.4	12.6
Absences: 1-2 weeks	8	12.3%	-	-
Absences: 3-4 weeks	26	40.0%	-	-
Absences: 5-8 weeks	14	21.5%	-	-
Did not miss school	17	26.2%	-	-

Source: Primary Data, 2026

Table 2 revealed concerning patterns of school absences related to circumcision. Among the 65 circumcised students, 73.8% (48 students) confirmed missing school for circumcision ceremonies and recovery periods. The mean absence duration was 28.4 days (approximately four weeks), with considerable variation (SD=12.6 days) reflecting individual healing rates and varying ceremonial obligations. These findings corroborated teacher reports and aligned with qualitative data indicating that circumcision-related absences ranged from preparation ceremonies through seclusion periods to post-circumcision celebrations (Namulondo & Walakira, 2018). The distribution of absence durations showed that 40.0% of students missed 3-4 weeks, while 21.5% were absent for 5-8 weeks—absences of sufficient length to cause substantial learning gaps and academic difficulties (UNESCO, 2018).

Notably, 26.2% of circumcised boys reported not missing school, having undergone the procedure during school holidays or utilizing medical circumcision that required shorter recovery periods. Qualitative interviews revealed that these students often faced criticism from community members who viewed holiday circumcision

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as deviation from tradition. One cultural leader stated, "Boys who are cut during holidays miss the full experience of Imbalu. They do not learn properly from the community." This perspective illustrated tension between educational considerations and cultural authenticity, with Social Learning Theory explaining how community disapproval served as negative reinforcement that discouraged scheduling circumcision around school calendars (Bandura, 1986).

Table 3: Comparison of Attendance Rates Between Circumcised and Uncircumcised Students

Group	N	Mean Attendance (%)	Std. Dev	t-value	df	Sig.
Circumcised	65	68.4%	14.2	-6.847	100	0.000
Uncircumcised	37	87.6%	8.7			

Source: Primary Data, 2026

Table 3 presented comparative analysis of attendance rates between circumcised and uncircumcised students, revealing stark differences. Circumcised students averaged 68.4% attendance (SD=14.2%) compared to 87.6% (SD=8.7%) for uncircumcised students. The independent samples t-test confirmed this difference was statistically significant ($t=-6.847$, $df=100$, $p<0.001$), indicating that circumcision participation substantially reduced school attendance rates by approximately 19 percentage points. This finding had serious educational implications because research consistently demonstrated that attendance rates below 80% correlated with poor academic performance and increased dropout risk (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2020).

The higher standard deviation among circumcised students (14.2%) compared to uncircumcised students (8.7%) suggested greater variability in attendance patterns within the circumcised group. Qualitative data explained this variation: some circumcised boys returned to school immediately after healing and demonstrated commitment to catching up, while others developed patterns of chronic absenteeism, having missed critical content and lost academic confidence. One teacher observed, "After circumcision, some boys never really come back mentally. They have been treated as men in the community, so sitting in a classroom feels childish to them." This observation reflected Social Learning Theory's concept of vicarious reinforcement, where boys observed circumcised men enjoying adult privileges and modeled these behaviors by distancing themselves from school (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020).

Table 4: Social Learning Theory Constructs Influencing Circumcision Decisions

SLT Construct	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	Std. Dev
Observed respected men who were circumcised	3.1%	5.4%	7.7%	52.3%	31.5%	4.04	0.96
Family members encouraged circumcision	4.6%	6.2%	9.2%	48.5%	31.5%	3.96	1.02
Peers who underwent circumcision gained respect	2.3%	4.6%	8.5%	54.6%	30.0%	4.05	0.90
Community rewards circumcised boys with privileges	5.4%	7.7%	10.8%	46.2%	29.9%	3.88	1.06
Uncircumcised boys face mockery and exclusion	3.8%	6.2%	9.2%	49.2%	31.6%	3.98	1.00

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Cultural leaders model importance of circumcision	4.6%	5.4%	11.5%	47.7%	30.8%	3.95	1.01
Overall Mean						**3.98**	**0.99**

Key: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neutral, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree

Source: Primary Data, 2026

Table 4 examined Social Learning Theory constructs influencing boys' decisions to undergo circumcision despite educational disruptions. The overall mean of 3.98 (SD=0.99) indicated strong agreement that social learning mechanisms powerfully shaped circumcision participation. The highest-rated indicator was peer respect (Mean=4.05, SD=0.90), with 84.6% of students agreeing that boys who underwent circumcision gained respect from peers. This finding exemplified Bandura's (1977) concept of vicarious reinforcement, where observers learned that specific behaviors produced desirable outcomes—in this case, elevated social status—even without experiencing the behavior directly.

Observational learning from respected circumcised men scored equally high (Mean=4.04, SD=0.96), with 83.8% agreement. From a Social Learning Theory perspective, boys observed fathers, uncles, teachers, and community leaders who were circumcised and held positions of respect, creating powerful models that linked circumcision with masculine success and authority (Bandura, 1986). These observations occurred repeatedly throughout childhood, creating deeply ingrained cognitive schemas associating circumcision with positive outcomes that outweighed educational considerations. One student explained, "Every man I respect is circumcised. I wanted to be like them, even if it meant missing school."

Social reinforcement through community privileges (Mean=3.88, SD=1.06) and family encouragement (Mean=3.96, SD=1.02) further reinforced circumcision decisions. Communities provided tangible rewards including permission to attend adult gatherings, eligibility for marriage, and recognition as full members during ceremonies (Silverman, 2004). These reinforcements created powerful incentives that overshadowed abstract future benefits of education. Negative reinforcement also operated strongly, with 80.8% of students agreeing that uncircumcised boys faced mockery and exclusion (Mean=3.98, SD=1.00). This social punishment created aversive conditions that boys sought to escape through circumcision, regardless of timing (Munguti & Mutua, 2013).

Cultural leaders' modeling of circumcision importance (Mean=3.95, SD=1.01) represented another Social Learning Theory mechanism. Leaders explicitly taught that circumcision was non-negotiable, transmitted cultural narratives glorifying the practice, and personally embodied values that privileged cultural identity over formal education. During focus group discussions, boys repeatedly referenced elder teachings about circumcision being "more important than anything else, including school." These verbal instructions, combined with symbolic modeling through rituals and ceremonies, created comprehensive learning environments that shaped boys' priorities (Brown et al., 2019).

Table 5: Academic Performance Changes Post-Circumcision (N=65)

Performance Indicator	**Frequency**	**Percentage**

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Performance declined significantly	23	35.4%
Performance declined moderately	19	29.2%
Performance remained the same	16	24.6%
Performance improved	7	10.8%

Source: Primary Data, 2026

Table 5 documented academic performance changes following circumcision, revealing that 64.6% of circumcised students experienced performance declines—35.4% significantly and 29.2% moderately. Only 10.8% reported improved performance, which qualitative data attributed to increased maturity and social confidence rather than academic factors. The predominance of performance declines supported quantitative findings about attendance reductions and aligned with educational research linking prolonged absences to learning gaps, missed assessments, and difficulty reintegrating into classroom routines (Karamagi et al., 2019).

Teachers elaborated on these challenges during interviews, noting that circumcised boys often missed critical instructional units, particularly in mathematics and sciences where cumulative learning was essential. One mathematics teacher stated, "When a boy misses four weeks during Senior 3, he misses the foundation for understanding the rest of the year's content. Even if he returns, he is lost." Additionally, circumcision occurred during different times for different students, making it difficult for teachers to provide targeted remediation. The 24.6% who reported unchanged performance typically had strong academic foundations, family support for catch-up learning, or underwent medical circumcision during holidays.

Table 6: Correlation Between Circumcision Participation and School Attendance

Variables	**Circumcision Participation**	**School Attendance Rate**
Circumcision Participation	1	-0.658**
School Attendance Rate	-0.658**	1

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); N=102

Source: Primary Data, 2026

Table 6 presented correlation analysis revealing a significant negative relationship ($r=-0.658$, $p<0.01$) between circumcision participation and school attendance rates. This strong inverse correlation indicated that as involvement in traditional circumcision ceremonies increased, attendance decreased substantially. The correlation coefficient suggested that approximately 43.3% of variance in attendance rates could be attributed to circumcision participation. This finding confirmed the study's central hypothesis that traditional male circumcision practices significantly impacted educational participation (Field, 2018).

The negative correlation was particularly concerning from an educational equity perspective because it meant that boys who conformed to cultural expectations faced systematic educational disadvantages compared to those who postponed or avoided circumcision. However, qualitative data revealed that boys generally did not view this trade-off negatively. Cultural values emphasized that circumcision's social benefits far exceeded any educational costs, reflecting Social Learning Theory's principle that learned behaviors persist when

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reinforcements outweigh punishments (Bandura, 1986). One student explained, "Even if I fail my exams, I will still be respected as a man. But if I don't get circumcised, I will be nothing, even with good grades."

Table 7: Multiple Regression Analysis - SLT Constructs Predicting Attendance Patterns

Model	**R**	**R Square**	**Adjusted R Square**	**Std. Error of Estimate**	
1	0.712	0.507	0.492	10.24	
Predictor Variables	**B**	**Std. Error**	**Beta**	**t**	**Sig.**
(Constant)	92.45	4.82	-	19.18	0.000
Observational Learning	-3.67	1.24	-0.298	-2.96	0.004
Social Reinforcement	-4.21	1.18	-0.341	-3.57	0.001
Cultural Modeling	-2.89	1.31	-0.221	-2.21	0.029

Dependent Variable: School Attendance Rate

Source: Primary Data, 2026

Table 7 presented multiple regression analysis examining Social Learning Theory constructs as predictors of attendance patterns. The model explained 50.7% of variance in attendance rates (R^2=0.507, Adjusted R^2=0.492), indicating that social learning mechanisms substantially influenced educational participation decisions. All three predictor variables—observational learning, social reinforcement, and cultural modeling—made significant unique contributions to predicting attendance, though with varying strengths.

Social reinforcement emerged as the strongest predictor (Beta=-0.341, t=-3.57, p=0.001), suggesting that community rewards for circumcision and punishments for non-circumcision most powerfully influenced boys to miss school. This finding aligned with Social Learning Theory's emphasis on consequences as primary drivers of behavior (Bandura, 1977). Boys learned through direct experience and peer observation that circumcision brought immediate, tangible social benefits, while school attendance offered only distant, uncertain future rewards (Kasozi, 2020).

Observational learning also significantly predicted attendance (Beta=-0.298, t=-2.96, p=0.004), confirming that watching respected circumcised men influenced boys' decisions to prioritize cultural practices over education. Cultural modeling, though a weaker predictor (Beta=-0.221, t=-2.21, p=0.029), remained statistically significant, indicating that elder teachings and ceremonial demonstrations contributed to attendance decisions. The negative beta coefficients for all predictors confirmed that higher levels of social learning about circumcision's importance corresponded with lower attendance rates, creating systematic educational disadvantages for culturally compliant boys (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020).

Conclusions

The study established that traditional male circumcision practices significantly impacted school attendance in Buyinja Sub-County, with circumcised boys missing an average of 28 days and demonstrating attendance rates 19 percentage points lower than uncircumcised peers. Social Learning Theory constructs observational learning, social reinforcement, and cultural modeling powerfully influenced boys' decisions to participate in circumcision ceremonies despite educational disruptions. The findings confirmed that cultural learning mechanisms created

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systematic attendance disadvantages, though communities valued circumcision's social benefits over educational costs.

Recommendations

Ministry of Education and Sports should develop a culturally sensitive national policy on traditional circumcision and education that recognizes the practice's cultural importance while establishing guidelines for minimizing educational disruptions (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2020). This policy should include provisions for flexible school calendars in circumcising communities, allowing extended breaks during traditional circumcision seasons to accommodate cultural obligations without penalizing attendance records.

Buyinja District Education Office should collaborate with cultural leadership councils to promote medical circumcision during school holidays as a viable alternative that respects tradition while reducing school absences (Bailey et al., 2007). Community sensitization campaigns should emphasize that medical circumcision does not diminish cultural authenticity and can be integrated with abbreviated traditional ceremonies during holiday periods.

School Administrators should establish peer tutoring programs and catch-up classes specifically designed for students returning from circumcision ceremonies, utilizing uncircumcised or previously circumcised students as peer educators (Wanyama, 2019). These programs would help reintegrate students academically while applying Social Learning Theory principles by positioning successful circumcised students as positive academic role models.

Cultural Leaders should modify circumcision season timing to align with school holidays, recognizing that educational success enhances rather than contradicts masculine identity and community development (Heald, 2019). Traditional ceremonies could be preserved entirely while scheduling them during April, August, or December school breaks, requiring coordinated community decision-making but offering substantial educational benefits.

Parent-Teacher Associations should facilitate dialogue sessions between parents, teachers, and cultural leaders to develop community-specific strategies that honor tradition while protecting educational continuity (Namulondo & Walakira, 2018). These sessions should emphasize both/and rather than either/or thinking, demonstrating that boys can successfully complete circumcision and education when communities coordinate timing.

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