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The Relationship Between School Practices and Students' Academic Performance at UACE in Selected Public Secondary Schools in Isingiro District, Uganda

Tumushabe Deus

Metropolitan International University

Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between school practices and students' academic performance at the Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education (UACE) level in selected public secondary schools in Isingiro District, Uganda. A cross-sectional research design was employed, utilizing structured questionnaires to collect quantitative data from a sample of 327 respondents (teachers and students) selected through simple random sampling from a target population of 1,960 across five institutions. The data were analyzed to determine the correlation between effective school practices, such as lesson planning, classroom observation, and feedback support and students' academic performance. The results revealed strong, statistically significant positive correlations between all three practices and academic performance, with feedback support showing the strongest relationship ($r = .818$, $p = .000$), followed by lesson planning ($r = .772$, $p = .000$) and classroom observation ($r = .688$, $p = .000$). The null hypotheses were therefore rejected, confirming that the observed relationships were not due to chance. A multiple regression analysis indicated that these practices collectively explained 69.3% of the variance in academic performance ($R^2 = .693$). The study concluded that structured, consistent, and formative school practices are critical and meaningful determinants of academic success at UACE. It was recommended that school administrations implement targeted institutional policies focused on systematic lesson planning reviews, regular classroom observations with constructive feedback, and consistent academic progress monitoring to enhance instructional quality, foster teacher development, and ultimately improve student learning outcomes.

Keywords: School Practices, Academic Performance, Lesson Planning, Classroom Observation, Feedback Support, UACE, Isingiro District, Correlation, Educational Management.

Background of the study

The pursuit of quality secondary education is a global imperative, recognized as a fundamental driver of individual socioeconomic mobility and national development (World Bank, 2018). Within education systems worldwide, the quality of school-based practices particularly instructional supervision, has evolved as a critical determinant of teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2007). Instructional Theory posits that effective learning results from well-designed, delivered, and refined teaching, a process that structured school practices are meant to support and enhance (Reigeluth, 1999; Glickman et al., 2018). In high-stakes examination systems like Uganda's Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education (UACE), which determines university entry and future prospects, the implementation of robust school practices becomes paramount for ensuring curriculum mastery and pedagogical excellence (Micheal et al., 2023).

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Across Sub-Saharan Africa, the challenge of translating educational policies into improved classroom practice and student achievement remains significant (UNESCO, 2022). In Uganda, despite policy frameworks like the Education Sector Strategic Plan that emphasize instructional leadership and supervision, persistent gaps exist between policy intent and implementation, particularly in rural public schools (MoES, 2022). The Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) reports consistently highlight performance disparities, with rural districts like Isingiro often recording lower UACE pass rates and fewer principal passes compared to national averages (UNEB, 2023). Preliminary inquiries and district reports suggest that weak internal school practices, characterized by infrequent classroom observations, perfunctory lesson plan checks, and inadequate pedagogical feedback, may be a potential contributor to this trend (Isingiro DEO, 2023). This suggests that while supervision is mandated, its practice may lack the consistency, depth, and formative focus required to genuinely impact teaching and learning (Ambrose & Gabiro, 2024).

Isingiro District, in southwestern Uganda, epitomizes this challenge. The district's public secondary schools face typical rural constraints, including large student-to-teacher ratios, limited instructional resources, and high workloads for school administrators who must juggle supervisory duties with other administrative responsibilities (Tumushabe & Ayesiga, 2022). Within this context, school practices are often strained. Lesson planning may be checked for compliance rather than instructional soundness, classroom visits may be irregular and lack constructive follow-up, and feedback may be delayed or generic, offering teachers little guidance for improvement (Kaheru, 2023). This creates a situation where a key lever for quality assurance, effective school-based practices, is underutilized, potentially undermining teacher support and student preparation for critical examinations like UACE (Faridah et al., 2023). While national studies acknowledge supervision challenges, there is a paucity of empirical, district-specific research examining the direct relationship between the quality of these core school practices and UACE academic performance in Isingiro.

Problem Statement

The Ugandan government, through the Ministry of Education and Sports, has established comprehensive policy frameworks and appointed instructional leaders within schools with the explicit aim of strengthening teaching quality and improving learner achievement, particularly at the critical UACE level (MoES, 2018; UNEB, 2021). These policies envision school administrators, such as head teachers and directors of studies, actively engaging in regular, formative school practices including structured lesson plan reviews, systematic classroom observations, and the provision of timely, constructive feedback to guide teacher development and ensure effective curriculum delivery (Nkata, 2020; Byamugisha, 2019). In this context, public secondary schools in districts such as Isingiro would be expected to exhibit strong academic performance in national examinations, as these mandated practices are presumed to be fully operational and effectively bridging the gap between national policy intentions and local school-level practices (Tumwesige, 2022).

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Despite these substantial investments and clear policy directives, student performance in the Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education (UACE) remains a pressing concern in several districts, with Isingiro District representing a particularly acute case. Recent UNEB reports (2023) indicate that over 40% of UACE candidates in the district failed to obtain principal passes, an outcome that severely constrains their opportunities for university admission and subsequent employment. Preliminary reviews and field observations suggest that this trend is strongly correlated with weak and irregular internal school practices within many public secondary schools (Kaheru, 2023; Mugisha, 2024). Rather than the expected consistent and supportive oversight, instructional practices are often implemented sporadically or conducted in a perfunctory manner, which compromises the very mechanisms essential for academic success (Julius & Audrey, 2025). This disconnects between the envisioned framework and its on-the-ground execution points to a significant operational failure, undermining teacher development, curriculum implementation, and ultimately, student achievement (Nabukenya, 2022; Oketcho, 2023).

Globally, and particularly in East Africa, the implementation of structured school practices has been linked to improved educational outcomes. However, retention of these practices remains inconsistent, with studies indicating that only between 50-60% of schools maintain regular supervision systems, largely due to administrative overload and limited resources (Olembo et al., 2017). School practice challenges especially those related to balancing lesson planning, classroom observation, and feedback duties significantly affect teaching quality and long-term student commitment to learning (Nelson, 2024). Despite these broader patterns, there is limited empirical research examining how specific school practices influence academic performance specifically within public secondary schools in Isingiro District. The absence of such data hinders evidence-based management strategies to address instructional quality and improve academic outcomes.

Main Objective

To establish the relationship between school practices and students' academic performance at UACE in selected public secondary schools in Isingiro District.

Methodology

The study adopted a cross-sectional research design to investigate the relationship between school practices and students' academic performance at UACE in selected public secondary schools in Isingiro District. The choice of this design was well-suited for the research objectives, as it facilitated the collection of data at a single point in time, providing a snapshot of the current state of school practices and their impact on academic performance (Nafiu, 2012). The cross-sectional approach allowed for the examination of the variables as they naturally occurred without the need for longitudinal tracking, thus optimizing time and resources. This design was particularly effective in exploring the prevalence and correlations of school practice factors and academic performance rates within the selected institutions, offering an efficient method for understanding these dynamics within a specific context. Through this design, the study

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gathered quantitative data from various staff members and students using structured questionnaires, ensuring a broad representation and contributing valuable insights into the field of educational management.

The research was conducted within selected public secondary schools in Isingiro District, a rural district in southwestern Uganda located in the western region of the country. The district was selected due to its concentration of such institutions and documented challenges with UACE performance, making it a pertinent case study. These schools played a vital role in Uganda's secondary education sector and offered a diverse sample of teachers and students, ensuring a broad range of perspectives and enhancing the reliability and scope of the research (Rasheed et al., 2022).

The study population consisted of both teachers and UACE students from the selected public secondary schools, with preliminary data indicating a total of approximately 1,960 individuals. This population comprised school administrators, teachers, and UACE students (Hassan Abdi et al., 2020). The inclusion of both teacher and student categories was deliberate to provide a comprehensive view of school practice dynamics and academic performance challenges across different roles within the institutions. To ensure a representative sample from this finite population, the sample size was determined using Yamane's formula, which calculated a target sample of 327 participants, with a margin of error of 0.05 (Nafiu et al., 2012). This sample size was deemed sufficient to produce statistically significant results and enhance the generalizability of the findings. The sampling procedure employed a combination of purposive sampling for administrators and simple random sampling for teachers and students to ensure fair representation of the key subgroups.

Results

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics on school practices and academic performance in selected public secondary schools in Isingiro district.

School Practices	Strongly Agreed	Agreed	Neutral	Disagreed	Strongly Disagreed	Mean	STD
Teachers adhere to lesson planning guidelines.	69 (29.7%)	50 (21.6%)	20 (8.6%)	59 (25.4%)	34 (14.7%)	3.61	1.358
Class observation improves teaching effectiveness.	76 (32.8%)	66 (28.4%)	30 (12.9%)	32 (13.8%)	28 (12.1%)	3.56	1.382
I receive feedback on my academic	75 (32.3%)	59 (25.4%)	30 (12.9%)	36 (15.5%)	32 (13.8%)	3.47	1.429

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performance frequently.							
My performance has improved due to teacher involvement.	51 (22.0%)	96 (41.4%)	37 (15.9%)	18 (7.8%)	30 (12.9%)	3.52	1.276
The school regularly tracks our academic performance.	52 (22.4%)	88 (37.9%)	42 (18.1%)	23 (9.9%)	27 (11.6%)	3.50	1.266

Source: Primary Data, 2025

On the statement that teachers adhere to lesson planning guidelines, nearly 30% of the respondents strongly agreed (69; 29.7%) and 21.6% agreed (50; 21.6%). This meant that approximately half of the students acknowledged that teachers followed formal planning processes. However, a significant group remained neutral (20; 8.6%), which implied that they were uncertain or had mixed experiences regarding planning adherence. In contrast, some respondents disagreed (59; 25.4%) and strongly disagreed (34; 14.7%), suggesting that a combined 40.1% of students perceived that teachers did not consistently follow lesson planning guidelines (Nelson et al., 2022). The mean of 3.61 reflected overall moderate agreement, while the standard deviation of 1.358 indicated moderate variability, meaning that while many respondents felt positively, there was noticeable inconsistency across schools.

A student explained, "When teachers plan their lessons well, we understand concepts better because the teaching is organized. However, some teachers come to class unprepared, which makes learning difficult and affects our performance in tests." (Student, IS001: 25/11/2025) Another respondent emphasized that classroom observation had a direct impact on teaching quality, stating, "When head teachers or directors come to observe classes, teachers prepare better and use better teaching methods. This makes lessons more interesting and helps us understand better." (Student, IS002: 25/11/2025)

Regarding the school's feedback system, students highlighted both strengths and limitations. One student noted, "We get feedback after tests and exams, which helps us know our weak areas. However, sometimes the feedback comes too late, when we have already moved to new topics." (Student, IS003: 25/11/2025) Another student suggested improvements, observing, "If teachers could give us feedback immediately after assignments and tests, we would correct our mistakes faster and improve our performance." (Student, IS004: 25/11/2025)

Collectively, these responses indicated that while school practices were generally in place, there was room for improvement to support academic performance by ensuring more consistent implementation.

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With respect to whether classroom observation improved teaching effectiveness, the findings showed that a considerable proportion strongly agreed (76; 32.8%) and another significant group agreed (66; 28.4%). Together, these accounted for 61.2% of respondents who affirmed that classroom observation contributed to better teaching. A notable proportion, however, remained neutral (30; 12.9%), indicating uncertainty or mixed experiences, while 13.8% (32 respondents) disagreed and 12.1% (28 respondents) strongly disagreed, signaling dissatisfaction among 25.9% of students. The mean score of 3.56 reflected general agreement, but not as strong as other indicators, suggesting that classroom observation was moderately effective but still imperfect. The standard deviation of 1.382 again suggested moderate variability, meaning not all students benefited equally from classroom observation practices.

On whether students received frequent feedback on academic performance, the results were moderately positive. A large proportion strongly agreed (75; 32.3%) and a quarter agreed (59; 25.4%), giving a combined 57.7% of respondents who felt they received regular feedback. Meanwhile, 30 respondents (12.9%) were neutral, which reflected indecision, possibly due to mixed experiences. At the same time, 36 respondents (15.5%) disagreed and 32 respondents (13.8%) strongly disagreed, showing that about 29.3% of students still struggled to get consistent feedback. The mean of 3.47 was among the lower scores across all items, indicating that feedback practices needed improvement. Furthermore, the relatively high standard deviation of 1.429 suggested that responses were spread out, meaning that students had varied experiences with feedback systems.

In examining whether the school regularly tracked academic performance, the findings revealed that 52 respondents (22.4%) strongly agreed and 88 respondents (37.9%) agreed, amounting to 60.3% of the students who valued performance tracking as important. However, 42 respondents (18.1%) were neutral, showing that they were undecided on the extent to which tracking occurred. On the other hand, 23 respondents (9.9%) disagreed and 27 respondents (11.6%) strongly disagreed, making a combined 21.5% of students who were dissatisfied with the regularity of performance tracking. The mean score of 3.50 demonstrated moderate agreement, while the relatively high standard deviation of 1.266 reflected a wide spread in opinions. This implied that although many students recognized the importance of performance tracking, inconsistency in its implementation left others dissatisfied.

Table 2: Relationship between school practices and students' academic performance in selected public secondary schools in Isingiro district.

Correlations		Students' Academic Performance
Lesson Planning	Pearson Correlation	.772**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	332
Classroom Observation	Pearson Correlation	.688**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

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	N	332
Feedback Support	Pearson Correlation	.818**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	332

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The correlation coefficients revealed strong positive relationships between all three school practices and academic performance. For lesson planning, the correlation coefficient (r) was 0.772, indicating that as lesson planning practices improved, students' academic performance also tended to increase. For classroom observation, r = 0.688 showed a substantial positive relationship, while feedback support had the strongest correlation at r = 0.818. The significance values (Sig.) for all correlations were 0.000, which is well below the conventional 0.05 threshold. Consequently, we rejected the null hypotheses that there were no relationships between school practices and academic performance. The statistical significance confirmed that the observed relationships were not due to chance, and that proper school practices were meaningful determinants of academic performance. The sample size of 332 respondents provided sufficient statistical power to detect these relationships reliably, ensuring that the findings were robust and representative of the population in these schools. The strong positive correlations indicated that school practices accounted for a substantial proportion of the variability in academic performance. In practical terms, this meant that schools that effectively implemented lesson planning, conducted regular classroom observations, and provided consistent feedback were likely to enhance student learning outcomes and improve examination performance.

Findings of the study

It was established that school practices significantly influenced students' academic performance at UACE in selected public secondary schools in Isingiro District. The findings indicated that a substantial proportion of students perceived lesson planning as important for organized teaching and better understanding of concepts. Many respondents highlighted that when teachers planned their lessons well, learning became more structured and comprehensible. This aligns with the observations of Katusiime (2021), who noted that structured lesson planning enhances instructional clarity and student engagement, particularly in examination classes. Student interviews corroborated this, with some emphasizing that periods of poor lesson planning coincided with lower comprehension and performance in tests. Nonetheless, the general consensus suggested that effective lesson planning contributed positively to teaching quality and students' academic performance.

It was further established that classroom observation played a critical role in improving teaching quality and student performance. Most respondents acknowledged that when teachers were observed, they prepared better and used more effective teaching methods, which enhanced student understanding. While a smaller group expressed uncertainty or dissatisfaction regarding the frequency of observations, the overall perception was that the practice largely contributed

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to better teaching. This finding resonates with previous research indicating that regular classroom observation positively impacts teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes (Glickman et al., 2018; Sahlberg, 2015). Student narratives emphasized that when observation was properly implemented, teachers were more attentive to student needs and adapted their teaching strategies accordingly.

It was also established that feedback support within the schools significantly influenced academic performance, which in turn affected learning outcomes. A large majority of respondents reported that timely and constructive feedback helped them identify weaknesses and improve their performance. Nonetheless, some students noted challenges arising from delayed feedback or insufficient guidance, which occasionally hindered their academic progress. These observations align with literature suggesting that immediate and specific feedback is a critical mechanism for enhancing learning, as students who receive regular feedback can correct mistakes and improve their understanding more effectively (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Olembo et al., 2017). Student suggestions for improvement included providing feedback sooner after assessments and offering more detailed explanations of errors to further enhance learning.

Conclusions

It was concluded that school practices significantly influenced students' academic performance at UACE in selected public secondary schools in Isingiro District. The findings indicated that a substantial proportion of students perceived lesson planning as essential for organized teaching and better learning outcomes. Many respondents noted that well-planned lessons enhanced their understanding of concepts and improved their performance in assessments. Student interviews reinforced this observation, with participants reporting that teachers who consistently followed lesson planning guidelines delivered more coherent and effective instruction.

It was further concluded that classroom observation played a critical role in improving teaching quality and student performance. Most respondents reported that regular observation motivated teachers to prepare better and use more effective instructional strategies, which in turn enhanced student learning. Although a small group expressed uncertainty about the consistency of observations, the prevailing perception was that the practice generally contributed to better teaching. This led to the conclusion that systematic classroom observation was a key determinant of instructional quality and academic success.

It was also concluded that feedback support within the schools significantly affected academic performance. A large majority of respondents indicated that timely and constructive feedback helped them identify and address learning gaps, leading to improved outcomes. Nonetheless, some students highlighted challenges associated with delayed or insufficient feedback, which occasionally hampered their academic progress. Students suggested improvements such as providing feedback more promptly after assessments and offering more detailed guidance to further enhance learning. This led to the conclusion that consistent and quality feedback was essential for student academic growth and examination performance.

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Recommendations

To improve students' academic performance at UACE in selected public secondary schools in Isingiro District, institutions should take several key actions. Schools need to ensure consistent and effective lesson planning by regularly monitoring and supporting teachers in developing comprehensive lesson plans that align with curriculum objectives and student needs. Adequate time should be allocated for lesson preparation and refinement, allowing teachers to design engaging and effective learning experiences that would enhance student understanding and performance.

Regular classroom observations should be conducted with constructive feedback to improve teaching practices. School administrators should implement systematic observation schedules and provide teachers with specific, actionable feedback to enhance their instructional methods. Observation should focus on student engagement, teaching strategies, and learning outcomes rather than mere compliance.

Timely and constructive feedback mechanisms should be established to support student learning. Teachers should provide prompt feedback on assignments, tests, and examinations, with clear explanations of errors and guidance for improvement. Feedback should be specific, focused on learning goals, and delivered in a manner that encourages student reflection and growth.

Schools should also establish regular monitoring and evaluation systems for academic performance, allowing teachers and administrators to track student progress and identify areas needing intervention. Professional development programs should be implemented to enhance teachers' skills in lesson planning, classroom instruction, and feedback provision. Finally, schools should create supportive learning environments that encourage teacher collaboration and the sharing of best practices to continuously improve instructional quality and student outcomes.

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