

Influence of School Leadership on Academic Performance in Government Secondary Schools: A Case Study of Mbarara District

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of school leadership on academic performance in government secondary schools in Mbarara District, Uganda. Recognising that the head teacher's leadership is a pivotal determinant of school effectiveness, the study investigated how instructional leadership, participative decision-making, supervision and monitoring, and resource management relate to students' academic performance. A descriptive cross-sectional design with a mixed-methods approach was used, and data were gathered from 180 respondents comprising head teachers, teachers, and members of school management committees through questionnaires and interviews. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression were employed for analysis. The results showed a strong positive and significant relationship between school leadership and academic performance ($r = 0.65$, $p < 0.01$), with leadership dimensions jointly accounting for 50.7% of the variance in performance ($R^2 = 0.507$). Instructional leadership and supervision emerged as the strongest predictors. The study concludes that effective school leadership is central to improving academic performance and recommends strengthening the instructional and supervisory capacity of head teachers.

Keywords: School leadership, academic performance, government secondary schools, instructional leadership, Mbarara District, Uganda

1.0 Introduction

The quality of leadership in a school is among the most decisive factors shaping its academic outcomes. Extensive research on school effectiveness has consistently identified leadership as second only to classroom teaching in its influence on student learning, and, unlike teaching, leadership exerts its effect across the entire institution by shaping the conditions under which teaching and learning occur (Nicholas & Nancy, 2024). The head teacher, as the principal leader, sets the vision, establishes academic priorities, allocates resources, supervises instruction, motivates staff, and cultivates the school climate (A. I. Kazaara, 2025). Where leadership is effective, schools tend to be orderly, purposeful, and academically focused; where it is weak, discipline erodes, staff morale declines, and academic standards fall (Suzan & Gracious Kazaara, 2023).

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In Uganda, government secondary schools serve a large share of the student population and are expected to provide quality education that prepares young people for higher education and productive citizenship(Julius & Audrey, 2026). However, the academic performance of these schools, as reflected in national examination results, varies widely, and many government secondary schools consistently record poor outcomes(David et al., 2023). This variation is striking because government schools operate under broadly similar policy frameworks, funding arrangements, and curricula, which suggests that differences in performance arise substantially from school-level factors, prominent among which is the quality of leadership(Moses & Nancy, 2024). Two schools with comparable resources and student intakes may achieve markedly different results depending on how effectively they are led(Julius & Nancy, 2026).

School leadership is a multidimensional construct. Instructional leadership concerns the head teacher's direct involvement in defining the school's academic mission, managing the instructional programme, and promoting a positive learning climate(Onyeaka et al., 2024). Participative leadership involves sharing decision-making authority with teachers and stakeholders, fostering ownership and collaboration(A. G. Kazaara et al., 2024). Supervision and monitoring entail overseeing teaching, tracking student progress, and holding staff accountable. Resource management concerns the effective mobilisation and deployment of financial, human, and material resources to support teaching and learning(Gloria et al., 2023). Each of these dimensions is theorised to influence academic performance, but the strength and relative importance of their effects in the Ugandan government secondary context are not well established.

Mbarara District, in Western Uganda, provides a pertinent setting for examining these relationships. The district hosts a range of government secondary schools with divergent performance records, offering an opportunity to investigate how leadership practices correspond to academic outcomes across varied institutional contexts(Julius & Nancy, 2026). Understanding these relationships is important because leadership, unlike many structural constraints, is amenable to improvement through training, support, and accountability, making it a promising lever for raising performance(Sarah & Audrey, 2024).

Although the general importance of school leadership is acknowledged in policy discourse, empirical evidence quantifying its influence on academic performance in Ugandan government secondary schools remains limited, and few studies disaggregate the effects of specific leadership dimensions(Julius & Kazaara, 2026b). This study addresses that gap by examining, through correlation and regression analysis, how instructional leadership, participative decision-making, supervision, and resource management relate to academic performance in Mbarara District(Frank et al., 2023). The findings are significant for the Ministry of Education and Sports, district education officials, and school managers seeking to strengthen leadership as a means of improving learning outcomes. The article continues with the problem statement, objectives, literature review, methodology, results and interpretation, and conclusions.

2.0 Statement of the Problem

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Government secondary schools in Mbarara District are expected to deliver quality education leading to strong performance in national examinations (Mark et al., 2023). In reality, however, many of these schools record persistently poor academic results, with high proportions of candidates failing to attain the grades required for progression to higher education or gainful employment. Given that government secondary schools operate under similar funding, staffing, and curriculum arrangements, the wide disparities in performance among them point strongly to differences at the school level, particularly in the quality of leadership provided by head teachers (Julius & Audrey, 2026).

Observations and stakeholder concerns within the district suggest that weak instructional leadership, inadequate supervision of teaching, exclusionary decision-making, and poor resource management characterise many underperforming schools (Ariyo, 2023). Head teachers in some schools are reported to focus on administrative routine at the expense of instructional leadership, to supervise teaching irregularly, and to manage resources inefficiently (Seth & Ntirandekura, 2022). Yet the precise extent to which these leadership deficits account for the observed performance gaps has not been rigorously established through empirical research in the district. Consequently, interventions to improve performance risk being poorly targeted.

If the influence of leadership on academic performance is not clearly established and addressed, government secondary schools in the district will continue to produce disappointing results, undermining students' life chances and the returns on public investment in education. This study therefore sought to determine the influence of school leadership on academic performance and to identify which leadership dimensions most strongly affect performance, so as to inform effective leadership development and school improvement.

3.0 Main Objective

The main objective of the study was to examine the influence of school leadership on academic performance in government secondary schools in Mbarara District, Uganda.

3.1 Specific Objectives

- i. To assess the leadership practices of head teachers in government secondary schools in Mbarara District.
- ii. To establish the relationship between leadership dimensions (instructional leadership, participative decision-making, supervision, and resource management) and academic performance.
- iii. To determine the relative contribution of each leadership dimension to academic performance.

4.0 Literature Review

Research on school leadership is anchored in several theoretical models, notably instructional leadership theory, transformational leadership theory, and distributed leadership theory. Instructional leadership theory emphasises the leader's role in defining the school's mission, managing the instructional programme, and promoting a positive school climate, positioning academic outcomes at the centre of leadership practice(Frank et al., 2023). Transformational leadership theory focuses on the leader's capacity to inspire, motivate, and develop staff towards shared goals, thereby raising the collective commitment and effort that underpin performance(Ntirandekura, Ainebyoona, et al., 2022). Distributed leadership theory holds that leadership is most effective when responsibility is shared among staff rather than concentrated in a single individual, enabling broader engagement and expertise(Isaac et al., 2023). Together, these theories frame leadership as a set of practices that shape the conditions for effective teaching and learning.

A substantial body of empirical evidence links leadership to student outcomes. International studies have shown that leadership effects on learning, though largely indirect, are substantial, operating through teacher motivation, instructional quality, and school climate(Winny et al., 2023). Meta-analyses indicate that instructional leadership practices—setting goals, monitoring progress, and supporting teaching—have among the strongest effects on student achievement. Studies in sub-Saharan Africa corroborate these findings, reporting that schools led by heads who actively supervise instruction, set clear academic expectations, and manage resources prudently outperform those led less effectively(Ntirandekura, Friday, et al., 2022). Ugandan studies have likewise found that instructional and supervisory leadership are associated with better examination results, while purely administrative or laissez-faire leadership styles correlate with weaker outcomes(A. G. Kazaara & Nelson, 2024).

Instructional leadership features prominently in the literature. Head teachers who prioritise the academic mission, engage with curriculum and pedagogy, protect instructional time, and foster a results-oriented climate tend to preside over higher-performing schools(Julius, 2025). Studies emphasise that instructional leadership works by focusing the collective attention of the school on learning and by supporting teachers to improve their practice(F. Christopher et al., 2022). However, some research notes that head teachers in resource-constrained systems are often overwhelmed by administrative and financial responsibilities that crowd out instructional leadership, limiting its exercise(Godfrey et al., 2023).

Supervision and monitoring form a second theme. Regular classroom observation, feedback to teachers, and tracking of student performance are associated with improved teaching quality and accountability(Julius & Nancy, 2026). Research suggests that where supervision is systematic and developmental rather than punitive, it enhances teacher performance and, through it, student outcomes. Weak or inconsistent supervision, by contrast, permits absenteeism, poor lesson preparation, and low expectations to persist.

Participative decision-making and resource management constitute further themes. Involving teachers and stakeholders in decisions fosters commitment, shared ownership, and collaborative problem-solving, which studies

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link to stronger school performance and staff morale(T. Christopher et al., 2023). Effective resource management—mobilising funds, deploying staff optimally, and providing teaching materials—creates the material conditions for quality teaching. The literature cautions, however, that leadership dimensions interact and that their effects depend on context, including the availability of resources and the level of external support. Notwithstanding broad agreement on leadership's importance, few Ugandan studies quantify and compare the effects of these distinct dimensions within a single framework, a gap this study addresses(Julius & Kazaara, 2026a).

5.0 Methodology

5.1 Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional research design incorporating a mixed-methods approach. The design allowed the description of leadership practices and academic performance and the explanation of relationships among variables using data collected at a single point in time. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data enhanced both the measurement of relationships and the interpretation of findings(A. Nafiu et al., 2012).

5.2 Study Population and Area

The study was conducted in government secondary schools in Mbarara District. The target population comprised head teachers, teachers, and members of school management committees. Head teachers were central as the primary leaders, teachers provided perspectives on leadership practices and their effects, and school management committee members offered a governance viewpoint.

5.3 Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

A sample of 180 respondents was drawn from 20 government secondary schools, comprising 20 head teachers, 120 teachers, and 40 school management committee members. Schools were selected using stratified sampling based on performance categories, teachers were selected through simple random sampling, and head teachers and committee members were selected purposively as key informants(Hassan Abdi et al., 2020). The sample size was determined with reference to the Krejcie and Morgan guidelines.

5.4 Data Collection Instruments

A structured questionnaire measured the leadership dimensions—instructional leadership, participative decision-making, supervision, and resource management—and academic performance on a five-point Likert scale. Academic performance was corroborated using schools' recent Uganda Certificate of Education and Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education results. Interview guides were used with head teachers and committee members to obtain qualitative insights.

5.5 Validity and Reliability

Content validity was confirmed through expert review, producing a content validity index above 0.70. A pilot study established reliability, with the Cronbach's alpha for the leadership scale at 0.85, indicating high internal consistency.

5.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS(Nelson et al., 2022). Descriptive statistics summarised leadership practices and performance. Pearson correlation determined the strength and direction of relationships, and multiple regression assessed the combined and relative effects of the leadership dimensions on academic performance. Qualitative data were analysed thematically to enrich interpretation.

5.7 Ethical Considerations

Requisite permissions were obtained, informed consent was secured, participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

6. Results and Interpretation

6.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the leadership dimensions and academic performance based on responses from the 180 participants.

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Interpretation
Instructional leadership	3.21	0.82	Moderate
Supervision and monitoring	3.08	0.86	Moderate
Participative decision-making	3.34	0.78	Moderate
Resource management	2.96	0.89	Moderate
Overall school leadership	3.15	0.71	Moderate
Academic performance	3.02	0.74	Moderate

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The descriptive results in Table 1 indicate that school leadership in government secondary schools in Mbarara District was, on the whole, moderate, with an overall mean of 3.15 and a standard deviation of 0.71. Participative decision-making recorded the highest mean (3.34), suggesting that head teachers were relatively more inclined to involve staff in decisions than to excel in other leadership functions. Instructional leadership (3.21) was rated moderately, implying that head teachers engaged with the academic mission but not intensively, while supervision and monitoring (3.08) and resource management (2.96) attracted lower ratings, pointing to weaknesses in the systematic oversight of teaching

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and the effective deployment of resources. Academic performance recorded a moderate mean of 3.02, consistent with the district's mixed results. The sizeable standard deviations reveal substantial variation between schools, reinforcing the view that leadership quality differs markedly across institutions.

6.2 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation was used to establish the relationships between the leadership dimensions and academic performance, as shown in Table 2.

Variable	Academic Performance (r)	Sig. (p)
Instructional leadership	0.61	0.000
Supervision and monitoring	0.57	0.000
Participative decision-making	0.46	0.000
Resource management	0.50	0.000
Overall school leadership	0.65	0.000

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The correlation results in Table 2 show that all leadership dimensions were positively and significantly related to academic performance at the 0.01 level. Overall school leadership had a strong positive correlation with academic performance ($r = 0.65$, $p < 0.01$), affirming that stronger leadership is accompanied by better academic outcomes (Julius, 2024). Instructional leadership recorded the strongest individual association ($r = 0.61$), underscoring the centrality of the head teacher's direct engagement with the academic mission. Supervision and monitoring followed closely ($r = 0.57$), highlighting the value of systematic oversight of teaching and student progress. Resource management ($r = 0.50$) and participative decision-making ($r = 0.46$) were also significantly correlated, though more moderately, indicating that effective resource deployment and stakeholder involvement support performance but exert a somewhat weaker direct association than instructional and supervisory practices (Godfrey et al., 2023). The consistently positive pattern strongly supports the study's central proposition.

6.3 Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression assessed the combined and relative effects of the leadership dimensions on academic performance. Tables 3 and 4 present the results.

Model Summary	Value
R	0.712
R Square	0.507
Adjusted R Square	0.496

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Std. Error of Estimate		0.481	
F (4, 175)		44.98 (p = 0.000)	
Predictor	Beta (β)	t	Sig. (p)
Instructional leadership	0.32	4.83	0.000
Supervision and monitoring	0.28	4.15	0.000
Resource management	0.17	2.71	0.007
Participative decision-making	0.13	2.09	0.038

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The regression model summary in Table 3 indicates that the four leadership dimensions jointly explained 50.7% of the variance in academic performance ($R^2 = 0.507$), a substantial proportion that establishes school leadership as a major determinant of performance. The model was highly significant ($F(4, 175) = 44.98$, $p < 0.01$), confirming the predictive validity of the combined dimensions (Alex et al., 2024). The remaining 49.3% of variance is attributable to other factors such as student ability, teacher quality, and home background that fall outside the scope of the model.

The standardized coefficients in Table 4 clarify the relative importance of each dimension. Instructional leadership was the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.01$), confirming that a head teacher's active engagement with the academic mission—setting goals, managing the instructional programme, and fostering a learning-focused climate—has the greatest influence on student outcomes. Supervision and monitoring followed ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$), demonstrating that systematic oversight of teaching and progress meaningfully improves performance (Ntirandekura, Friday, et al., 2022). Resource management ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$) and participative decision-making ($\beta = 0.13$, $p < 0.05$) contributed positively but more modestly. Taken together, the results indicate that the leadership practices most directly connected to teaching and learning—instructional leadership and supervision—are the most consequential for academic performance, implying that efforts to develop head teachers' capacity should prioritise these instructional and supervisory functions.

7.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that school leadership exerts a strong, positive, and significant influence on academic performance in government secondary schools in Mbarara District, with instructional leadership and supervision being the most influential dimensions. It is recommended that the Ministry of Education and Sports and district authorities strengthen the instructional and supervisory capacity of head teachers through targeted training and mentoring, relieve head teachers of excessive administrative burdens so they can focus on instructional leadership, and institute accountability mechanisms for supervision and resource management. Head teachers should sustain participative

practices while intensifying their engagement with teaching and learning. Future research could employ objective examination data across more districts to further validate these relationships.

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