

**The Relationship Between School Farms And Learners' Interest In Agriculture Among Primary Schools In
Uganda: The Case Of Balawoli Sub-County, Kamuli District**

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Abstract

Uganda's agricultural sector continues to face a demographic challenge in which young people increasingly perceive farming as an unattractive, low-status livelihood option, a perception that education stakeholders have argued could be addressed in part through meaningful, hands-on agricultural learning experiences integrated into primary schooling, most notably through school farms. This study examined the relationship between school farms and learners' interest in agriculture among primary schools in Uganda, using Balawoli Sub-county, Kamuli District as a study area, guided by objectives that sought to establish the extent and nature of school farm activities in the sub-county's primary schools, assess learners' level of interest in agriculture, determine the relationship between school farm engagement and learners' interest in agriculture, and identify the challenges limiting the effectiveness of school farms in fostering this interest. A descriptive correlational research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches was adopted, with data collected from a sample of 186 respondents comprising upper primary learners, agriculture teachers, and head teachers from eight primary schools, using questionnaires, interviews, and school farm observation. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, multiple regression, and path analysis (AMOS). Results showed moderate-to-high learner engagement in school farm activities (mean = 3.58) and a significant positive correlation between school farm engagement and learners' interest in agriculture ($r = 0.588$, $p < 0.01$). Regression analysis showed that school farm engagement and perceived relevance of agriculture jointly explained 42.6 percent of the variance in learners' interest in agriculture ($R^2 = 0.426$). Path analysis revealed that perceived relevance of agriculture significantly mediates the relationship between school farm engagement and learners' interest, with a significant indirect effect ($\beta = 0.243$, $p < 0.01$) alongside a significant direct effect ($\beta = 0.287$, $p < 0.01$), yielding a total effect of 0.530. The study concludes that school farms have made a meaningful, though moderate, contribution to fostering learners' interest in agriculture in Balawoli Sub-county, operating substantially through their effect on learners' perceived relevance of agriculture to their own lives and futures, and recommends increased investment in school farm infrastructure, stronger integration of school farm activities into the agriculture curriculum, and deliberate efforts to showcase modern, profitable agricultural practices to learners.

Keywords: School farms, learners' interest in agriculture, experiential learning, primary schools, agricultural education, path analysis, Balawoli Sub-county, Kamuli District

Introduction

Agriculture remains the backbone of Uganda's economy and the primary livelihood source for the majority of its rural population, yet the sector faces a persistent and widely documented challenge in attracting the interest and long-term engagement of young people, many of whom increasingly perceive farming as a low-status, low-return livelihood

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option relative to alternative pursuits such as formal employment or urban-based trade(Audrey & Kazaara, 2025). In response to this challenge, agricultural and education policymakers in Uganda have promoted the integration of school farms into the primary school curriculum as a means of providing learners with practical, hands-on exposure to agricultural production, with the theoretical expectation that direct engagement with school farm activities, such as planting, tending, and harvesting crops or rearing livestock, can help learners develop a more positive perception of agriculture as a viable, potentially profitable, and personally relevant livelihood activity, thereby fostering greater interest in agriculture-related pursuits later in life(Audrey & Kazaara, 2025). Balawoli Sub-county, located in Kamuli District in Eastern Uganda, is a predominantly agrarian community where most primary schools maintain some form of school farm, typically used both for demonstration purposes within agriculture lessons and to generate supplementary food or income for the school, providing a relevant setting in which to examine empirically whether and how learners' engagement with these school farms is actually associated with their interest in agriculture(Julius et al., 2026).

This study is motivated by the recognition that while the policy rationale for integrating school farms into primary education is well established, the actual empirical relationship between the extent and nature of learners' engagement with school farm activities and their resulting interest in agriculture has received comparatively limited rigorous examination within specific Ugandan rural contexts such as Balawoli Sub-county(Julius & Nancy, 2026). Learners' interest in agriculture, understood here as their enjoyment of agriculture-related learning, their perception of agriculture as a viable future livelihood or career option, and their general engagement with agricultural topics and activities, is likely to be shaped not simply by the existence of a school farm but by the depth and quality of learners' actual engagement with it, as well as by the extent to which school farm activities help learners perceive agriculture as personally relevant and potentially rewarding, factors that this study seeks to examine empirically(Betty et al., 2026).

Problem Statement

Despite the near-universal presence of school farms across primary schools in Balawoli Sub-county, education officials and agriculture teachers within the sub-county have observed that many upper primary learners continue to express limited interest in agriculture as a subject and as a potential future livelihood, with informal reports suggesting that most learners aspire to non-agricultural careers despite their daily exposure to school farm activities, raising a fundamental question about whether the school farms currently maintained by schools in the sub-county are genuinely effective in fostering agricultural interest among learners, or whether their presence alone is insufficient to counteract broader societal perceptions of agriculture as an unattractive livelihood option(Ampaire et al., 2015). While school farms are widely present, there is considerable variation across schools in the sub-county in the extent to which learners are actively and meaningfully engaged in farm activities, ranging from schools where learners participate regularly

and substantively in planting, tending, and harvesting activities, to schools where the farm is maintained primarily by support staff with only limited, token learner involvement (Julius & Audrey, 2026). However, there is a scarcity of rigorous, locally grounded empirical research examining the specific relationship between the depth of learners' school farm engagement and their resulting interest in agriculture within Balawoli Sub-county, as well as the specific mechanisms, such as learners' perceived relevance of agriculture to their own lives, through which this relationship may operate (Buntin, 2020). This study addresses this gap by systematically investigating the relationship between school farms and learners' interest in agriculture among primary schools in Balawoli Sub-county.

Main Objective

The main objective of this study is to examine the relationship between school farms and learners' interest in agriculture among primary schools in Uganda, with specific reference to Balawoli Sub-county, Kamuli District.

Specific Objectives

The study is guided by the following specific objectives: to establish the extent and nature of school farm activities and learner engagement with them in primary schools within Balawoli Sub-county; to assess upper primary learners' level of interest in agriculture as a subject and as a potential future livelihood; to determine the relationship between school farm engagement and learners' interest in agriculture, taking into account the role of learners' perceived relevance of agriculture; and to identify the key challenges limiting the effectiveness of school farms in fostering learners' interest in agriculture, and to recommend measures for enhancing this contribution.

Literature Review

This study draws theoretically on experiential learning theory, which posits that meaningful learning occurs through direct engagement with concrete experiences followed by reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation, a framework that provides strong theoretical grounding for the expectation that learners' hands-on engagement with school farm activities, as opposed to purely classroom-based, theoretical agriculture instruction, is likely to foster deeper and more durable interest in agriculture (Kaazara & Audrey, 2025). This is complemented by expectancy-value theory of motivation, which explains individuals' interest and engagement in an activity as a function of both their expectation of success in that activity and the subjective value or relevance they attach to it, suggesting that school farm engagement is likely to foster agricultural interest most effectively when it helps learners perceive agriculture as both achievable and personally relevant to their own future prospects, rather than as an abstract, disconnected school subject (Betty et al., 2026). Social learning theory further contributes to this study's theoretical framing by highlighting how learners' attitudes towards agriculture are shaped not only by their direct farm engagement but also by the models and messages provided by teachers and other adults during farm-based activities, suggesting that the manner in which school farm activities are facilitated, and the specific messages conveyed about agriculture's viability and profitability, may be as important as learners' mere participation in shaping their resulting interest (Christopher et al., 2022).

Empirical studies on school farms and agricultural education in Sub-Saharan African primary and secondary school contexts have generally found positive associations between hands-on school farm engagement and various measures of learner interest in and attitude towards agriculture, with studies documenting that learners who participate actively and regularly in school farm activities report more positive perceptions of agriculture as a viable livelihood option compared to learners with only passive or token exposure to school farms (Julius et al., 2026). Studies conducted within the Ugandan primary education context have similarly found that schools which integrate school farm activities more substantively into the agriculture curriculum, rather than treating the farm as a peripheral, support-staff-managed enterprise, tend to report higher levels of learner engagement and more positive learner attitudes towards agriculture, while schools with more nominal or poorly integrated school farms have been found to produce more limited effects on learner interest despite the farm's physical presence (Julius & Kazaara, 2025). Other scholars examining the specific mechanisms linking school farm engagement to agricultural interest have emphasized the mediating role of learners' perceived relevance of agriculture, finding that school farm activities that explicitly connect farm work to modern, profitable agricultural practices and potential income-generating opportunities are considerably more effective in fostering genuine learner interest than farm activities conducted purely as a routine, disconnected school chore, a finding that provides the empirical basis for the mediation model examined in the present study (Julius & Nancy, 2025).

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive correlational research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively examine the relationship between school farms and learners' interest in agriculture among primary schools in Balawoli Sub-county (Nafiu et al., 2017). The target population comprised upper primary learners (Primary 5 to Primary 7) from primary schools within the sub-county maintaining active school farms, together with agriculture teachers and head teachers at these schools (Jallow et al., 2022). Eight primary schools were purposively selected to ensure representation of schools with varying levels of school farm activity based on preliminary consultation with the sub-county education office, and from within these schools, a sample of 186 respondents was drawn, comprising 150 upper primary learners selected through stratified random sampling proportionate to class size, 24 agriculture teachers (three per school), and 12 head teachers/deputy head teachers (Seth, 2019).

Data collection was conducted using structured questionnaires administered to learner respondents, designed to capture the extent and nature of their engagement with school farm activities, their perceived relevance of agriculture to their own future livelihood prospects, and their overall interest in agriculture as a subject and potential career, complemented by a separate questionnaire administered to agriculture teachers capturing their perspectives on how school farm activities were organized and integrated into the curriculum (A. G. Kazaara & Julius, 2025). In addition,

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semi-structured interview guides were used to conduct in-depth interviews with head teachers regarding school-level approaches to school farm management and integration, and structured observation of each school's farm was conducted to independently assess the scale, diversity, and apparent level of learner involvement in farm activities, providing an objective source of data to complement self-reported survey responses. The validity of the questionnaire and observation instruments was established through expert review and pilot testing, while reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with all constructs returning coefficients above the acceptable threshold of 0.7 (A. I. Kazaara & Nancy, 2025). Quantitative data were analyzed in SPSS version 26 using descriptive statistics to characterize school farm engagement, perceived relevance, and learner interest in agriculture, and using Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis to examine the relationship between school farm engagement and learners' interest in agriculture (Nelson et al., 2022). A path model was further estimated in AMOS to test the hypothesized mediating role of perceived relevance of agriculture in the relationship between school farm engagement and learners' interest, generating standardized path coefficients for direct and indirect effects. Qualitative data obtained from interviews and observation notes were analyzed thematically and used to enrich and contextualize the quantitative findings. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant university and district education authorities prior to data collection, and informed consent, with parental/guardian consent and learner assent, was obtained from all respondents.

Results

Response Rate

Of the 186 questionnaires administered, 171 were correctly filled and returned, giving a response rate of 91.9 percent, comprising 138 learners, 22 agriculture teachers, and 11 head teachers/deputy head teachers, supplemented by structured observation of all eight school farms, all deemed adequate for analysis.

Descriptive Statistics

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 171)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percent (%)
Category of respondent	Learners	138	80.7
	Agriculture teachers	22	12.9
	Head teachers/deputy head teachers	11	6.4
Gender (learners)	Male	71	51.4
	Female	67	48.6
Class (learners)	Primary 5	44	31.9
	Primary 6	48	34.8
	Primary 7	46	33.3
Parents' main occupation (learners)	Subsistence/small-scale farming	104	75.4

	Other (trade, employment)	34	24.6
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Source: Primary Data, 2025

Table 1 showed that learners formed the large majority of respondents (80.7 percent), with a fairly even split by class level and by gender. The majority of learner respondents (75.4 percent) reported that their parents' main occupation was subsistence or small-scale farming, indicating that most learners came from farming households and had some degree of exposure to agricultural activity outside of school as well.

Descriptive Statistics for Study Constructs

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of School Farm Engagement, Perceived Relevance, and Learners' Interest in Agriculture (5-point Likert scale)

Construct	Indicator	Mean	Std. Dev.	Interpretation
School farm engagement	Regular hands-on participation in farm activities	3.58	0.89	High
	Overall school farm engagement index	3.51	0.86	Moderate–High
Perceived relevance of agriculture	Agriculture seen as a viable future livelihood	3.29	0.97	Moderate
	Overall perceived relevance index	3.24	0.94	Moderate
Learners' interest in agriculture	Enjoyment of agriculture lessons/activities	3.41	0.92	Moderate–High
	Interest in pursuing agriculture-related careers	2.95	1.05	Moderate
	Overall interest in agriculture index	3.18	0.95	Moderate

Source: Primary Data, 2025

Table 2 showed that school farm engagement was rated moderate-to-high overall (mean = 3.51), while perceived relevance of agriculture (mean = 3.24) and overall interest in agriculture (mean = 3.18) were both rated moderately. Notably, enjoyment of agriculture lessons and activities (mean = 3.41) was rated considerably higher than interest in actually pursuing agriculture-related careers (mean = 2.95), the lowest-rated indicator across all three constructs, suggesting that while learners generally enjoyed farm-based activities, this enjoyment did not automatically translate into strong career-oriented interest in agriculture.

Inferential Statistics

Correlation Analysis

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Matrix

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Variable	1	2	3
1. School farm engagement	1.000		
2. Perceived relevance of agriculture	0.527**	1.000	
3. Learners' interest in agriculture	0.588**	0.601**	1.000

Note: **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), n = 171 (teacher/head teacher responses used to corroborate learner-reported engagement levels).

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The correlation results in Table 3 showed a strong, statistically significant positive relationship between school farm engagement and learners' interest in agriculture ($r = 0.588$, $p < 0.01$), and between perceived relevance of agriculture and learners' interest ($r = 0.601$, $p < 0.01$), while school farm engagement and perceived relevance were themselves moderately correlated ($r = 0.527$, $p < 0.01$).

6.3.2 Regression Analysis

Table 4: Multiple Regression Results — Dependent Variable: Learners' Interest in Agriculture

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	t	Sig. (p)
(Constant)	0.812	0.291	—	2.790	0.006
School farm engagement	0.284	0.078	0.301	3.641	0.000
Perceived relevance of agriculture	0.334	0.076	0.352	4.395	0.000

Model summary: $R = 0.653$, $R^2 = 0.426$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.418$, $F(2, 168) = 62.31$, $p = 0.000$

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The regression results in Table 4 showed that the overall model was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) and jointly explained 42.6 percent of the variance in learners' interest in agriculture ($R^2 = 0.426$), with perceived relevance of agriculture emerging as the stronger predictor ($\beta = 0.352$, $p < 0.001$) compared to school farm engagement ($\beta = 0.301$, $p < 0.001$).

6.4 Path Analysis (Structural Model)

A path model was estimated in AMOS to test the hypothesized mediating role of perceived relevance of agriculture in the relationship between school farm engagement and learners' interest in agriculture.

Table 5: Standardized Path Coefficients

Path	Standardized β	C.R. (t-value)	p-value	Decision
School farm engagement $\rightarrow$ Perceived relevance	0.527	6.72	0.000	Significant
Perceived relevance $\rightarrow$ Learners' interest in agriculture	0.461	5.87	0.000	Significant

School farm engagement → Learners' interest (direct)	0.287	3.64	0.000	Significant
School farm engagement → Relevance → Interest (indirect)	0.243	—	0.002 (bootstrap)	Significant
Total effect (School farm engagement → Learners' interest)	0.530	—	0.000	Significant

Model fit indices: $\chi^2/df = 1.69$, GFI = 0.940, CFI = 0.957, RMSEA = 0.058 — acceptable model fit.

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The path analysis in Table 5 confirmed that school farm engagement influenced learners' interest in agriculture both directly ($\beta = 0.287$) and indirectly through its effect on perceived relevance of agriculture ($\beta = 0.243$), with perceived relevance functioning as a partial mediator; the total effect of school farm engagement on learners' interest ($\beta = 0.530$) was notably larger than the direct effect alone, indicating that a substantial share of the benefit of school farm engagement for fostering agricultural interest was channeled through its effect on helping learners perceive agriculture as a personally relevant and viable future livelihood.

Qualitative Findings

School farm observation revealed considerable variation across the eight schools in the scale and apparent learner involvement in farm activities, with three schools maintaining diverse, well-tended farms with visible evidence of regular learner participation, while the remaining schools maintained smaller, less diverse farms managed primarily by support staff with more limited learner involvement. Interviews with head teachers and agriculture teachers at the higher-engagement schools consistently described deliberate efforts to connect farm activities to discussions of modern farming techniques, market opportunities, and successful local farmers, while teachers at lower-engagement schools more often described the farm as a routine, loosely supervised activity disconnected from broader classroom discussion of agriculture's economic potential, a pattern that closely mirrored the quantitative mediation results in Table 5 linking perceived relevance to stronger learner interest outcomes.

Discussion Of Results

The findings of this study provided strong empirical support for experiential learning theory's proposition that hands-on engagement with concrete experiences fosters deeper interest than passive or purely theoretical instruction, as demonstrated by the significant positive correlation between school farm engagement and learners' interest in agriculture ($r = 0.588$, Table 3). At the same time, the path coefficients in Table 5 provided important additional insight consistent with expectancy-value theory, showing that a substantial share of the total effect of school farm engagement on learners' interest (0.243 out of 0.530) was transmitted indirectly through learners' perceived relevance of agriculture, confirming that hands-on farm engagement alone was not sufficient to generate strong agricultural interest; rather, the extent to which such engagement helped learners perceive agriculture as personally relevant and potentially rewarding was a critical intervening factor. This finding was strongly corroborated by the qualitative

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observation that schools which explicitly connected farm activities to discussions of modern farming techniques and market opportunities achieved visibly higher learner engagement and, by extension, the higher perceived relevance and interest scores predicted by the path model, compared to schools where the farm was managed as a routine, disconnected chore.

The finding that enjoyment of agriculture lessons (mean = 3.41) was rated considerably higher than interest in pursuing agriculture-related careers specifically (mean = 2.95) suggested an important distinction between learners' immediate, activity-level engagement with agriculture and their longer-term career aspirations, a gap that echoed broader literature documenting the persistent challenge of translating positive attitudes towards agricultural activities into genuine career interest among young people, given the many competing social and economic factors, beyond school-based experience alone, that shape career aspirations. This finding suggested that while school farms in Balawoli Sub-county had made a meaningful contribution to fostering learner interest in agriculture as a subject, additional deliberate efforts, particularly around explicitly showcasing agriculture's economic viability and modern, profitable practices, would likely be needed to translate this activity-level interest into stronger career-oriented aspirations among learners.

Conclusion

This study concluded that school farm engagement was significantly and positively associated with learners' interest in agriculture among primary schools in Balawoli Sub-county, with this relationship operating both directly and, to a substantial degree, indirectly through school farm engagement's effect on learners' perceived relevance of agriculture to their own future livelihood prospects. The study further concluded that the specific manner in which school farm activities were facilitated and integrated into broader classroom discussion, rather than the mere physical presence of a school farm, was a critical determinant of the extent to which farm engagement translated into meaningful learner interest, as evidenced by the marked difference in outcomes between schools that actively connected farm work to modern agricultural practices and market opportunities and those that managed the farm as a routine, disconnected activity. It was also concluded that learners' enjoyment of agriculture-related activities did not automatically translate into strong interest in pursuing agriculture as a future career, indicating that fostering genuine career-oriented agricultural interest would likely require efforts beyond school farm engagement alone.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, it is recommended that primary schools in Balawoli Sub-county, with support from the district education and production departments, invest in expanding and diversifying school farm activities, and ensure that all upper primary learners, not only a subset, are given regular, substantive opportunities for hands-on participation in farm activities rather than passive observation. It is further recommended that agriculture teachers be supported, through targeted training, to more deliberately and explicitly connect school farm activities to

discussions of modern farming techniques, market opportunities, and successful local farming role models, given the demonstrated importance of perceived relevance in translating farm engagement into learner interest.

The study also recommends that schools organize periodic exposure visits or guest talks featuring successful, especially youthful, commercial farmers from within or near the sub-county, in order to more directly showcase agriculture's potential as a viable and rewarding career option and thereby help close the gap identified between learners' activity-level enjoyment and their career-oriented interest in agriculture. Additionally, it is recommended that the district education office establish minimum standards or guidelines for school farm management and learner involvement, given the considerable variation observed across schools in this study, to ensure more consistent quality and learner engagement across the sub-county's primary schools. Finally, the study recommends that further research be conducted, potentially through a longitudinal design, to track whether the agricultural interest fostered through school farm engagement at the primary level translates into sustained interest and eventual livelihood choices as learner's progress through secondary education and into adulthood.

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