

A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY ON SCHOOL SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT AND SECONDARY SCHOOL LEARNERS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN MBARARA CITY.

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Abstract.

Background.

One of the central objectives of the post-independence education agenda in Uganda was to ensure that all children have access to quality education as a pathway to national development. This study examined the effect of the school social environment on the academic performance of secondary school learners in Mbarara City.

Methodology.

A descriptive survey research design was employed, targeting a study population of secondary school learners and teachers. The sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's formula, with respondents selected through stratified and simple random sampling techniques. Inclusion criteria encompassed actively enrolled secondary school learners and teachers, while non-teaching staff and newly transferred students were excluded. Data were collected using questionnaires and an observation checklist. Quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), generating descriptive and inferential statistics.

Results.

271 (73.8%) of the students were male, 98(54.1%) of teachers were within the 25-35 years age bracket, and 66(36.5%) of teachers had between 6-10 years of experience. There was a strong positive correlation between School Social Environment and Learners' Academic Performance, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.644, which was statistically significant at the 0.01 level ($p = 0.000$), 74.6% of students demonstrated a strong understanding of the subject matter, 66.3% completed assignments on time, and 78.6 % actively participated in class. Further, 73.0% reported a performance improvement, and 70.2% performed well in exams.

Conclusion.

The study established a statistically significant positive relationship between the school's social environment and academic performance. The study concludes that a conducive school social environment enhances academic performance.

Recommendation.

Schools should strengthen student-teacher relationships, enhance extracurricular activities, and implement fair discipline policies to foster better learning outcomes.

Keywords: *School social environment, Academic performance, Secondary school learners, Learning environment, Mbarara City.*

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Background.

One of the central objectives of the post-independence education agenda in Uganda was to ensure that all children have access to quality education as a pathway to national development (Akomolafe, 2016). In line with this vision, the Ugandan government has implemented several reforms aimed at improving the quality of education, particularly at

the secondary school level. These efforts include initiatives such as the enhancement of teacher remuneration and the recruitment of qualified teaching personnel (Amon, 2017). However, despite these interventions, public secondary schools in Mbarara City continue to record persistently low academic performance.

Original Article

The recurring underperformance of learners raises critical questions about the effectiveness of the existing strategies and points to deeper systemic issues that may not have been adequately addressed. While much of the national focus has been on infrastructure and teacher compensation, emerging evidence suggests that non-academic factors—especially those rooted in the school's social environment—play a significant role in influencing academic outcomes. According to Tanga (2019), both home-based and school-based social conditions significantly affect student learning and performance. The study explored the components of the school's social environment and how they relate to academic performance. These components include teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, school climate, and extracurricular activities. While these components are well-documented in literature from developed and some developing countries, they have not been sufficiently examined in Ugandan urban secondary schools. Additionally, many existing studies overlook the specific experiences and perceptions of students themselves regarding these social dynamics.

In Mbarara City, challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, limited teacher-student interaction, lack of emotional support systems, and poor peer relationships may be undermining learners' academic success. Furthermore, factors like bullying, teacher absenteeism, and minimal parental involvement contribute to a school climate that is not conducive to effective learning. Yet, limited research has been conducted to explore the extent to which these social-environmental factors within schools influence learners' academic achievement in this context. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the relationship between the school's social environment and learners'

academic performance in public secondary schools in Mbarara City. This study examines the effect of the school social environment on the academic performance of secondary school learners in Mbarara City.

Methodology.

Research Design.

This study adopted a quantitative research specifically, the study employed a descriptive survey research design.

Study Area.

This study was carried out in Mbarara City. Mbarara City, the third-largest city in Uganda after Kampala and Jinja, is located in the Western Region. The city was separated into six boroughs: Nyamitanga, Biharwe, Kakiika, Nyakayojo, Kamukuzi, and Kakoba Divisions. The district headquarters were located there, and it functioned as the primary commercial hub for the majority of Uganda's southwest districts. Mbarara was given city status by the Ugandan government in May 2019, and it became a reality on July 1, 2020.

Target Population.

The study targeted secondary schools in Mbarara city. The target population was 8200 students and 380 teachers from selected secondary schools in Mbarara city.

Sample Size.

All the study participants from the selected secondary schools were selected using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) Table, which implied that the bigger the population, the bigger the sample. Details of the sample size are shown in Table 1, provided below.

Table 1: Sample of Research Participants

SN	Schools	TEACHERS		STUDENTS	
		Population	Sample	Population	Sample
1	School A	70	32	1500	60
2	School B	70	32	2000	67
3	School C	40	20	1200	55
4	School D	70	32	1000	50
5	School E	30	15	800	40
6	School F	40	20	900	45
7	School G	40	20	400	25
8	School H	20	10	400	25
	TOTAL	380	181	8200	367

Source: obtained from Krejcie and Morgan (1970) and adjusted by the researcher, 2024, for this study

Table 2: Sample size and technique

No.	Category of respondent	Sample size	Sampling technique
1	Teachers	181	Simple random
2	Students	367	Simple random
	Total	548	

The research respondents who participated in the study comprised 181 teachers and 367 students from selected private and government secondary schools in Mbarara City. The total sample size for the study was 548 respondents.

Sampling Procedure.
Selection of Schools.

Stratified sampling was used to determine the number of schools included in the sample. In Mbarara City, schools were divided into two categories: privately owned and government-aided. Using stratified sampling techniques, a sample of four (4) schools was chosen from each stratum. Nonetheless, the sampling procedure was predicated on the school's size, personnel, enrollment, location, and academic achievement on national exams. In order to produce trustworthy findings, all schools were deemed equally essential. Hence, eight (8) schools were used in the study, comprising four (4) government-aided secondary schools and four (4) privately owned secondary schools.

Selection of Respondents

Teachers and students were randomly selected using numbers written on paper. The papers were placed in a basin with numbers ranging from 1 to 200 for each selected school, and those who picked odd numbers (in ascending order) were taken as the sample size. Simple random sampling was preferred because it was non-biased. In total, 548 respondents were selected for the study, including teachers and students—367 students and 181 teachers.

Inclusion.

The study included only students who were from selected secondary schools in Mbarara city. The study participants consisted of only teachers of selected schools that were located in Mbarara city.

Research Instruments
Questionnaire

The questionnaire was the principal instrument for primary data collection. The questionnaires were administered to the students and teachers. The first section (A) of the questionnaire was used to collect data on the profile of respondents. The second section (B) of the questionnaire focused on the school's social environment, while the third

section (C) addressed learners' academic performance. Questions in Sections B and C were structured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from SD = Strongly Disagree (1), D = Disagree (2), N = Neutral (3), A = Agree (4), and SA = Strongly Agree (5). Closed-ended questions intended to gather quantitative information pertinent to the specific research variables were included in the questionnaire.

Observation Checklist.

To document the state of activities in the schools, direct observation was employed. As a result, the researcher was able to confirm the data collected via surveys. Academic performance in schools was also recorded through document analysis.

Data Quality Control.

Validity of Research Instruments.

In this study, content validity was established through expert consultation. The researcher sought guidance from lecturers and research methodology experts from the Faculty of Education, Arts, and Media Studies at Bishop Stuart University. These experts reviewed the questionnaire and observation checklist to ensure that all items were clear, relevant, and aligned with the study's objectives and conceptual framework. Their feedback guided the refinement of the tools, thereby ensuring that the content of each section appropriately represented the constructs of the school's social environment and academic performance.

Reliability of Research Instrument

To assess reliability, the researcher conducted a pilot study involving a small sample of students and teachers from schools that were not part of the main study but were within the same region and population characteristics. The responses from the pilot study were analyzed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, a statistical measure of internal consistency. A reliability coefficient of 0.70 or higher is considered acceptable in social science research. In this study, the questionnaire achieved a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.72, indicating that the instrument was sufficiently reliable for data collection purposes .

Data Collection Procedure.

First, applied for a permit from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNSCT), which was in charge of granting research permits in Uganda, and the Bishop Stuart University Research and Ethics Committee (BSU-REC). After obtaining additional approval from Mbarara City's City Education Officer, the researcher went ahead and visited the chosen schools. All questionnaires were gathered on the same day, with the exception of the Director of Studies and head teachers, who needed additional time because of their hectic school schedules. The day the surveys were distributed was also the day that observation and document analysis were done.

Data Analysis Techniques.

The data was analyzed quantitatively. Questionnaires filled out by respondents were collected by the research assistants and the principal investigator and then checked for accuracy in filling. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was utilized by the researcher to analyze the data. In order to accomplish this, cleaning, coding, inputting, and analysis were done initially. The quantitative data were summarized, categorized for easy classification, and adjusted to remove inconsistencies to make tabulation and interpretation easier. The sample data was described using descriptive statistics to show the usual respondent and the overall response pattern. From this, judgments and inferences were made. Descriptive statistical methods such as means, standard deviation, percentages, and frequencies were used on the demographic characteristics of respondents for objectives one of the studies and objective two.

For Objective Three: To examine the relationship between the school social environment and learners' academic performance in secondary schools in Mbarara City, quantitative data was analyzed using the Pearson

correlation coefficient to determine the relationship between the school social environment and learners' academic performance.

Ethical approval.

Permission was sought from the Bishop Stuart University Research and Ethics Committee (BSU-REC) after proposal approval clearance from the Faculty of Education, Arts and Media Studies, before going to the field. Then, permissions from the office of the City Education Office and the office of the head teachers of selected schools were obtained. The tasks that needed to be completed were outlined in a work plan. In order to identify the schools where the research will be conducted, sampling was done. After printing adequate copies of the research tools and touring the study site to become acquainted with the regions where the research would be done, the investigator started gathering data. Anonymity was guaranteed for both teachers and pupils, and data was labeled with numbers rather than names. Participants' information was handled with confidentiality by upholding respondents' rights and privacy even after the study was completed. The researcher made it clear to them that the information was purely for academic purposes, that their participation was voluntary, and that any decision to withdraw or decline any information whatsoever at any time would be respected.

Informed consent.

A consent form was filled out by the respondents after explaining the purpose of the study to them. The respondents were assured of confidentiality as no names would appear on the questionnaire. No participant was forced to participate in the study, and all the study materials used during the interviews were safely kept under lock and key, only accessible by the researcher.

Results.

Demographic Characteristics of Participants.

Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of Participants.

Gender	Students		Teachers		Total	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Male	271	73.8	128	70.7	399	72.8
Female	96	26.2	53	29.3	149	27.2
Total	367	100.0	181	100.0	548	100

Source: Field Data 2024

Table 1 presents data on the gender distribution of students and teachers. Among students, 271 (73.8%) are male,

while 96 (26.2%) are female. Similarly, among teachers, 128 (70.7%) are male, and 53 (29.3%) are female. Overall,

the total population comprises 399 males (72.8%) and 149 females (27.2%).

Table 4: Age distribution of Learners

Students		
Age Bracket	Frequency	Percent
Less than 14	1	.3
14-18 years	205	55.9
19-22 years	157	42.8
23 years and above	4	1.1
Total	367	100.0

Source: Field Data 2024

Table 4 indicates that, majority, 205 students (55.9%), fall within the 14-18-year age bracket, while 157 students (42.8%) are in the 19-22 age range. Only 4(1.1%) were aged 23 years and above, and 1 (0.3%) was under 14 years.

Table 5: Age Distribution of Teachers.

Teachers		
Age Bracket	Frequency	Percent
Less than 25 years	16	8.8
25 -35 years	98	54.1
36-45 years	48	26.5
46-55 years	13	7.2
56 and above	6	3.3
Total	181	100.0

Source: Field Data 2024

Table 5 reveals the age distribution of teachers involved in the study, with the majority, 98(54.1%), falling within the 25-35 years age bracket. This suggests that a significant portion of the teaching workforce is relatively young. The second-largest group was teachers aged 36-45 years,

making up 26.5% of the total. Teachers under 25 years comprised 16(8.8%), while 13(7.2%) of teachers were aged between 46-55 years and 6(3.3%) were aged 56 and above.

Table 6: Class Distribution of Learners.

Class	Frequency	Percent
Senior 1	12	3.3
Senior 2	52	14.2
Senior 3	89	24.3
Senior 4	31	8.4
Senior 5	96	26.2
Senior 6	87	23.7
Total	367	100.0

Source: Field Data 2024

Table 5 shows that Senior 5 had the highest frequency of 96 students, representing 26.2% of the total, followed closely by Senior 3 with 89 students, accounting for 24.3%. Senior 6 had 87 students (23.7%), while Senior 2 had 52

students (14.2%). Senior 4 and Senior 1 had lower frequencies, with 31 (8.4%) and 12 (3.3%) students, respectively.

Table 7: Whether Day or Boarding Learner

A day student or a boarding student	Frequency	Percent
Day student	61	16.6
Boarding student	306	83.4
Total	367	100.0

Source: Field Data 2024

Results in Table 7 present the distribution of students as either day or boarding students. Out of a total of 367 students, 61 (16.6%) are day students, while the majority, 306 (83.4%), are boarding students.

Table 8 Years of teaching experience.

Years of teaching experience	Frequency	Percent
0-5 years	57	31.5
6-10 years	66	36.5
11-15 years	18	9.9
16 years and above	40	22.1
Total	181	100.0

Source: Field Data 2024

Table 8 shows that the majority, 66(36.5%), of teachers had between 6-10 years of experience, followed closely by 57 those with 0-5 years of experience, representing 31.5% of the total. 40(22.1%) had 16 years or more of teaching

experience, while only 18(9.9%) had between 11-15 years of experience. This shows that the teaching workforce was relatively young, with over two-thirds (68.0%) having 10 years or less of experience.

School social environment within secondary schools.

Table 9: School social environment within secondary schools (n=367)

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Std dev
The school environment is supportive and encouraging for students.	24(6.5%)	13(3.5%)	47(12.8%)	130(35.4%)	151(41.1%)	3.99	1.166
Teachers are approachable and willing to help with academic issues.	10(2.7%)	20(5.4%)	43(11.7%)	121(33.0%)	170(46.3%)	4.12	1.078
I feel safe and secure within the school premises.	20(5.4%)	18(4.9%)	40(10.9%)	112(30.5%)	172(46.9%)	4.04	1.218
I have good relationships with my classmates.	11(3.0%)	11(3.0%)	23(6.3%)	104(28.3%)	212(57.8%)	4.30	1.098
The school effectively manages and resolves conflicts among students.	21(5.7%)	35(9.5%)	70(19.1%)	112(30.5%)	120(32.7%)	3.86	1.306
Extracurricular activities are available and encouraged by the school.	18(4.9%)	22(6.0%)	51(13.9%)	106(28.9%)	166(45.2%)	4.00	1.204
The school provides sufficient guidance and	16(4.4%)	25(6.8%)	51(13.9%)	98(26.7%)	176(48.0%)	4.06	1.152

counseling services.							
The school administration is responsive to students' needs and concerns.	28(7.6%)	30(8.2%)	69(18.8%)	116(31.6%)	117(31.9%)	3.66	1.310
Peer interactions in school contribute positively to my academic performance.	16(4.4%)	36(9.8%)	76(20.7%)	118(32.2%)	113(30.8%)	3.69	1.247
The school's discipline policies are fair and consistently enforced.	23(6.3%)	31(8.4%)	48(13.1%)	140(38.1%)	121(33.0%)	3.80	1.225

Source: Field Data 2024

Table 9 revealed that 281 (76.5%) of respondents agreed that the school environment is supportive and encouraging for students. Conversely, 47 respondents (12.8%) remained neutral while 37 (10.0%) disagreed with the statement. The mean score for the statement that *the school environment is supportive and encouraging for students* was 3.99 (SD = 1.166). This suggests that most students find the environment encouraging, though some variation in responses exists.

Results in Table 9 indicated that 291 (79.3%). Of respondents agreed that teachers are approachable and willing to help with academic issues. 43 respondents (11.7%) were neutral, and 30(8.1%) were in contrast with the statement. The mean score of 4.12 (SD = 1.078) indicates strong agreement among students, with relatively low variability, suggesting consistent perceptions of teacher support.

The study findings showed that the majority, 284 (77.4%) of respondents were in agreement that they feel safe within the school premises, followed by 40 (10.9%) of respondents who were neutral, while 38 (10.3%) respondents disagreed. Results in Table 9 reported that 316 (86.1%) of study participants agreed that they have good relationships with classmates. However, 23 respondents (6.3%) were neutral about the statement, and 11 (3.0%) disagreed with the statement. A high mean score of 4.30 (SD = 1.098) suggests strong peer relationships, contributing positively to students' school experiences. For conflict resolution, 232 (63.2%) study participants agreed that the school manages conflicts effectively. On the other hand, 70 respondents (19.1%) were neutral about the

statement, and 56 (15.2%) disagreed. Results in Table 9 show that the majority, 272 (74.1%) of study participants agreed that extracurricular activities are available and encouraged, followed by 51 respondents (13.9%) who were neutral and 40 (10.9%) who disagreed with the statement.

A majority of 274 (74.7%) were in agreement that the school provides sufficient guidance and counseling services, while 51 respondents (13.9%) were neutral. Conversely, 41 (11.2%) disagreed that the school provides sufficient guidance and counseling services. The mean score of 4.06 (SD = 1.152) implies that many students find these services helpful, but some variation in responses suggests room for improvement.

The study findings revealed that the school administration is responsive to students' needs and concerns, and received mixed feedback, with 233 (63.5%) participants agreeing, while 69 (18.8%) respondents were neutral about the statement. However, 58 (15.8%) disagreed with the statement.

Positive feedback came from 231 (63.0%) participants who agreed that peer interactions contribute positively to academic performance, and 76 (20.7%) study participants remained neutral. However, 52 (14.2%) disagreed that peer interactions contribute positively to academic performance. This implies that peer interactions were seen as moderately contributing to academic performance (mean = 3.69, standard deviation = 1.247).

Regarding fairness and enforcement of discipline policies, the majority, 261 (71.1%), agreed with the statement. In contrast, 54 (14.7%) were in disagreement with the statement, while 48 respondents (13.1%) were neutral.

Teacher Responses on School social environment within secondary schools in Mbarara City

Table 10: School social environment within secondary schools in Mbarara City (n=181)

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	St. Dev
The school environment is supportive and encouraging for students.	14(7.7%)	2(1.1%)	9(5.0%)	79(43.6%)	73(40.3%)	4.01	1.247
Teachers are approachable and willing to help students with academic issues.	0(0%)	12(6.6%)	1(0.6%)	58(32.0%)	107(59.1%)	4.39	0.991
The school promotes a positive and inclusive atmosphere for all students.	4(2.2%)	15(8.3%)	20(11.0%)	54(29.3%)	83(45.9%)	4.01	1.245
Students have good relationships with their classmates.	0(0%)	2(1.1%)	26(14.4%)	100(55.2%)	48(26.5%)	3.99	0.949
The school effectively manages and resolves conflicts among students.	0(0%)	1(0.6%)	25(13.8%)	75(41.4%)	66(36.5%)	3.91	1.328
Extracurricular activities are available and encouraged by the school.	8(4.4%)	8(4.4%)	11(6.1%)	73(40.3%)	81(44.8%)	4.17	1.030
The school provides sufficient guidance and counseling services for students.	0(0%)	6(3.3%)	29(16.0%)	85(47.0%)	58(32.0%)	4.03	0.939
The school administration is responsive to students' needs and concerns.	2(1.1%)	10(5.5%)	11(6.1%)	66(36.5%)	87(48.1%)	4.17	1.133
Peer interactions in school contribute positively to students' academic performance.	0(0.0%)	11(6.1%)	14(7.7%)	76(42.0%)	77(42.5%)	4.18	0.932
The school's discipline policies are fair and consistently enforced.	0(0.0%)	11(6.1%)	17(9.4%)	88(48.6%)	65(35.9%)	4.14	0.824
The school encourages and supports student leadership and involvement in school activities.	0(0.0%)	9(5.0%)	3(1.7%)	54(29.8%)	115(63.5%)	4.52	0.764

Source: Field Data 2024

Table 10 shows that the majority, 152 (83.9%), agreed that the school environment is supportive and encouraging for students. On the contrary, 16 (8.8%) study participants disagreed, and 9 (5.0%) respondents were neutral. The mean score for this statement is 4.01, indicating general agreement, while the standard deviation of 1.247 reflects moderate variability in responses.

Study findings in Table 10 indicated that a majority of 165 (91.1%) participants agreed that teachers are approachable and willing to help with academic issues. Only 12 respondents (6.6%) disagreed, and 1 (0.6%) remained neutral, showing overwhelmingly positive feedback. The mean score is 4.39, with a standard deviation of 0.991, suggesting strong agreement with minimal variability. The findings of the study show that the most frequent response was 137 (75.2%) respondents agreeing that the school promotes a positive and inclusive atmosphere. However, 20 (11.0%) were neutral, and 19 (10.5%) disagreed. The mean score of 4.01 reflects agreement, while the standard deviation of 1.245 indicates moderate variability in opinions.

The findings of the study revealed that the highest frequency was among 148 (81.7%) study participants who agreed that students have good relationships with their classmates. 26 (14.4%) respondents were neutral, while 2 (1.1%) disagreed. The mean score of 3.99 suggests general agreement, with a standard deviation of 0.949 showing relatively low variability.

The majority, 141 (77.9%) of respondents, agreed that the school effectively manages and resolves conflicts among students. Meanwhile, 25 (13.8%) respondents were neutral, and only 1 (0.6%) disagreed. The mean score is 3.91, indicating agreement, with a standard deviation of 1.328, reflecting moderate variability.

The highest response was from 154 (85.1%) study participants who agreed that extracurricular activities are

available and encouraged. 11 (6.1%) were neutral, while 16 (8.8%) respondents disagreed. The mean score is 4.17, indicating strong agreement, with a standard deviation of 1.030 showing moderate variability.

Findings showed that the majority, 143 (79.0%), agreed that the school provides sufficient guidance and counseling services. 29 (16.0%) respondents were neutral, while 6 (3.3%) respondents disagreed. No respondents strongly disagreed. The mean score is 4.03, reflecting agreement, with a standard deviation of 0.939 showing low variability. Results in Table 10 show that 153 (84.6%) of respondents agreed that the school administration is responsive to students' needs and concerns. Only 11 (6.1%) respondents were neutral, while 12 (6.6%) disagreed. The mean score is 4.17, indicating agreement, with a standard deviation of 1.133, reflecting moderate variability.

Results in Table 10 show that 153 (84.5%) respondents agreed that peer interactions positively contribute to academic performance. 14 (7.7%) respondents were neutral, while 11 (6.1%) disagreed. The mean score is 4.18, with a standard deviation of 0.932, suggesting strong agreement with low variability.

The majority, 153 (84.5%) respondents, agreed that the school's discipline policies are fair and consistently enforced. 17 respondents (9.4%) were neutral, and 11 respondents (6.1%) disagreed. There were no strong disagreements. The mean score is 4.14, indicating agreement, with a standard deviation of 0.824, reflecting low variability.

The findings of the study reported that the majority, 169 (93.3%) respondents, agreed that the school encourages and supports student leadership and involvement in activities. Only 3 (1.7%) respondents were neutral, and 9 (5.0%) respondents disagreed. The mean score is 4.52, with a standard deviation of 0.764, indicating strong agreement with minimal variability.

Learners' academic performance in secondary schools in Mbarara City.
Learner Responses on Learners' academic performance in secondary schools in Mbarara City

Table 11: Learners' academic performance in secondary schools in Mbarara City (n=367)

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	St. dev
I complete my assignments on time.	10(2.7%)	16(4.4%)	9(13.4%)	134(36.5%)	158(43.1%)	4.13	0.985
I participate actively in class discussions.	9(2.5%)	9(2.5%)	48(13.1%)	132(36.0%)	167(45.5%)	4.18	0.981
I feel confident about my academic abilities.	9(2.5%)	16(4.4%)	42(11.4%)	111(30.2%)	183(49.9%)	4.16	1.117
I achieve good grades in my exams.	11(3.0%)	21(5.7%)	89(24.3%)	125(34.1%)	116(31.6%)	3.81	1.115
I seek help from teachers when I don't understand something.	18(4.9%)	29(7.9%)	71(19.3%)	128(34.9%)	10(32.7%)	3.82	1.137
I balance my academic work with extracurricular activities effectively.	16(4.4%)	32(8.7%)	60(16.3%)	115(31.5%)	140(38.1%)	3.90	1.179
I find the school environment conducive to learning.	20(5.4%)	22(6.0%)	61(16.6%)	99(27.0%)	163(44.4%)	3.97	1.196
I feel motivated to do well in my studies.	8(2.2%)	6(1.6%)	37(10.1%)	73(19.9%)	240(65.4%)	4.42	0.986
I regularly attend classes.	9(2.5%)	13(3.5%)	12(3.3%)	58(15.8%)	274(74.7%)	4.56	0.936
I use additional resources (e.g., library, online materials) to study.	30(8.2%)	10(2.7%)	44(12.0%)	105(28.6%)	177(48.2%)	4.05	1.221

Source: Field Data 2024

Table 11 revealed that the majority of respondents, 292 (79.6%), agreed that they completed their assignments on time. 49 respondents (13.4%) were neutral, while 26 (7.1%) disagreed. The high mean of 4.13 indicates general agreement, with a standard deviation of 0.985, reflecting relatively consistent responses.

Results in Table 11 revealed that 299 (81.5%) participants agreed they actively participated in class discussions. 48 (13.1%) participants were neutral, while only 18 (5.0%) respondents disagreed. The mean of 4.18 suggests strong agreement, and the standard deviation of 0.981 indicates low variability.

The findings of the study show that 294 (80.1%) participants agreed they feel confident in their academic abilities. Meanwhile, 42 respondents (11.4%) were neutral, and 25 (6.9%) disagreed. The mean score of 4.16 shows high confidence, with a standard deviation of 1.117, indicating moderate variability.

Results in Table 11 revealed that 241 (65.7%) participants agreed they achieved good grades in exams. However, 89

(24.3%) participants were neutral, and 32 (8.7%) disagreed. The mean score of 3.81 reflects moderate agreement, with a standard deviation of 1.115, showing variability in responses.

The findings of the study show that 248 (67.6%) respondents agreed they would seek help from teachers when needed. However, 71 respondents (19.3%) were neutral, and 47 (12.8%) disagreed. The mean score of 3.82 indicates agreement, while the standard deviation of 1.137 reflects moderate variability.

The majority, 255 (69.6%) of study participants, agreed they balance academics and extracurricular activities effectively. Meanwhile, 60 (16.3%) were neutral, and 48 (13.1%) disagreed. The mean score of 3.90 indicates overall agreement, with a standard deviation of 1.179, showing some variability.

The highest frequency was from 262 (71.4%) who agreed that the school environment is conducive to learning. 61 (16.6%) participants were neutral, and 42 (11.4%) disagreed. The mean score of 3.97 suggests general

agreement, while the standard deviation of 1.196 reflects moderate variability.

A significant majority, 313 (85.3%) study participants agreed that they feel motivated to do well in their studies. 37 (10.1%) respondents were neutral, while 14 (3.8%) disagreed. The high mean of 4.42 indicates strong agreement, with a standard deviation of 0.986, showing low variability.

The findings of the study reported that the majority, 332 (90.5%), agreed they regularly attend classes. Only 12

respondents (3.3%) were neutral, and 22 (6.0%) disagreed. The mean of 4.56 reflects strong agreement, and the standard deviation of 0.936 indicates low variability in responses.

The majority, 282 respondents (76.8%), agreed they use additional resources for studying. 44 respondents (12.0%) were neutral, while 40 respondents (10.9%) disagreed. The mean score of 4.05 indicates general agreement, with a standard deviation of 1.221, reflecting moderate variability.

Learner Responses on Learners' academic performance in secondary schools in Mbarara City

Table 12: Learners' academic performance in secondary schools in Mbarara City (n=181)

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	St. Dev
Students demonstrate a strong understanding of the subject matter.	8(4.4%)	13(7.2%)	25(13.8%)	92(50.8%)	43(23.8%)	3.82	1.017
Students consistently complete their assignments on time.	6(3.3%)	28(15.5%)	27(14.9%)	83(45.9%)	37(20.4%)	3.65	1.073
Students participate actively in class discussions.	0(0.0%)	4(2.2%)	32(17.7%)	91(50.3%)	51(28.3%)	3.99	0.904
Students show improvement in their academic performance over time.	5(2.8%)	5(2.8%)	33(18.2%)	83(45.9%)	49(27.1%)	3.82	1.147
Students demonstrate good problem-solving skills.	3(1.7%)	8(4.4%)	49(27.1%)	85(47.0%)	36(19.9%)	3.79	0.869
Students perform well in exams and assessments.	5(2.8%)	13(7.2%)	36(19.9%)	89(49.2%)	38(21.0%)	3.78	0.950
Students exhibit strong critical thinking abilities.	3(1.7%)	12(6.6%)	64(35.4%)	79(43.6%)	23(12.7%)	3.59	0.856
Students can apply learned concepts to real-life situations.	8(4.4%)	16(8.8%)	37(20.4%)	90(49.7%)	30(16.6%)	3.65	1.003
Students are motivated and show interest in their studies.	6(3.3%)	4(2.2%)	42(23.2%)	75(41.4%)	51(28.2%)	3.84	1.071
Students work well both independently and collaboratively with peers.	5(2.8%)	6(3.3%)	23(12.7%)	115(63.5%)	32(17.7%)	3.90	0.824
Students seek help and clarification when they do not understand the material.	6(3.3%)	3(1.7%)	29(16%)	96(53.0%)	47(26.0%)	3.97	0.888
Students attend classes regularly and punctually.	0(0.0%)	16(8.8%)	30(16.6%)	86(47.5%)	49(27.1%)	3.93	0.888

Students demonstrate creativity and innovation in their work.	0(0.0%)	9(5.0%)	29(16.0%)	103(56.9%)	40(22.1%)	3.96	0.763
Students show respect and positive behavior towards teachers and classmates, contributing to a conducive learning environment.	0(0.0%)	8(4.4%)	20(11.0%)	87(48.1%)	66(36.5%)	4.17	0.792

Source: Field Data 2024

Table 12 shows that the majority of 135(74.6%) of respondents were in agreement that they demonstrated a strong understanding of the subject matter, while 21(11.6%) were in disagreement. A notable 25(13.8%) remained neutral. The mean response was 3.82, with a standard deviation of 1.017, indicating a generally positive perception with moderate variability. Most students, 120(66.3%), also reported completing their assignments on time, whereas 34(18.8%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 27(14.9%) were neutral. The mean was 3.65, and the standard deviation was 1.073, reflecting moderate agreement and variability.

The findings show that active participation was highly rated, with 142(78.6%) of students agreeing. Only 4(2.2%) disagreed, and 32(17.7%) were neutral. The mean of 3.99 and a standard deviation of 0.904 show strong agreement and less variability. Results in Table ... indicate that performance improvement was observed by 132(73.0%) of students, while 10(5.6%) disagreed, and 33(18.2%) were neutral. The mean score was 3.82, with a standard deviation of 1.147, indicating overall positive feedback but with some variability.

The findings also revealed that majority students (121(66.9%)) demonstrated good problem-solving skills, while 11(6.1%) disagreed, and 49(27.1%) remained neutral. The mean was 3.79, and the standard deviation was 0.869, reflecting moderate agreement and less variation. Students performing well in exams was noted by 127(70.2%) study participants, with 18(10.0%) disagreeing and 36(19.9%) neutral. The mean of 3.78 and a standard deviation of 0.950 suggest a favorable view with some variability.

Findings also showed that critical thinking was rated positively by 102(56.3%), while 15(8.3%) disagreed, and 64(35.4%) were neutral. The mean score of 3.59 and a standard deviation of 0.856 indicate a moderate level of

agreement with relatively low variability. Most students 120(66.3%) were able to apply learned concepts, while 24(13.2%) disagreed, and 37(20.4%) were neutral. The mean score was 3.65, and the standard deviation was 1.003, suggesting moderate agreement with moderate variability.

Results in Table 12 indicated a significant portion of 126(69.6%) of students displayed motivation and interest, with 10(5.5%) disagreeing and 42(23.2%) remaining neutral. The mean score was 3.84, and the standard deviation was 1.071, reflecting positive perceptions with moderate variability. Students working well independently and collaboratively were strongly endorsed by 147(81.2%), while 11(6.1%) disagreed, and 23(12.7%) were neutral. The mean of 3.90 and the standard deviation of 0.824 show strong agreement with low variability.

Results in Table 12 show that most students (143(79.0%)) sought help when needed, with only 9(5.0%) disagreeing and 29(16.0%) neutral. The mean was 3.97, and the standard deviation was 0.888, reflecting strong agreement with low variability.

The findings of the study show that regular and punctual attendance was reported by 135(74.6%), while 16(8.8%) disagreed, and 30(16.6%) were neutral. The mean was 3.93, with a standard deviation of 0.888, showing strong agreement and consistency. Findings also indicate that Creativity was highly endorsed by 143(79.0%), with 9(5.0%) disagreeing and 29(16.0%) neutral. The mean score was 3.96, and the standard deviation was 0.763, reflecting strong agreement with minimal variability.

Lastly, the majority, 153(84.6%), of the study participants agreed that students show respect and positive behavior, contributing to a conducive environment. Only 8(4.4%) disagreed, and 20(11.0%) were neutral. The mean score was 4.17, with a standard deviation of 0.792, indicating the highest agreement and low variability.

Relationship between the school social environment and learners' academic performance in secondary schools in Mbarara City.

Table 13: Testing the relationship between the school social environment and learners' academic performance in secondary schools in Mbarara City (n=367).

		School_Social_Environment	Learners_Academic_Performance
School Social Environment	Pearson Correlation	1	.644**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	367	367
Learners Academic Performance	Pearson Correlation	.644**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	367	367

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

Source: Field Data 2024

Table 13 shows a strong positive correlation between School Social Environment and Learners' Academic Performance, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.644, which was statistically significant at the 0.01 level ($p = 0.000$). This indicates that as the quality of the school social environment improves, learners' academic

performance tends to improve as well. The significance of the correlation at a 0.01 level suggests that this relationship is highly reliable. Thus, the data suggest that enhancing the school's social environment can have a notable positive effect on students' academic performance.

Teachers' Response on the Relationship between the school social environment and learners' academic performance in secondary schools in Mbarara City.

Table 14: Correlation coefficient results from teachers' responses (n=181)

		School Social Environment: Teachers	Academic Performance Teacher
School Social Environment: Teachers	Pearson Correlation	1	.657**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	181	181
Academic Performance Teachers	Pearson Correlation	.657**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	181	181

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

Source: Field Data 2024

Table 14 confirmed students' findings that students' academic performance and the school's social environment are significantly positively correlated, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.657. This suggests a link between the two variables that is moderate to strong. With a p-value of 0.000, well below the 0.01 significance level, the association is statistically significant. It implies that students' academic performance increases in tandem with the improvement of the school's social environment.

Discussion of results.

School social environment within secondary schools.

The findings indicate that most students perceive the school environment as supportive and teachers as approachable. This supports Gallagher and Griffore (2018), who argue that school administration and teacher support

significantly impact students' academic performance. Similarly, the presence of a strong support system contributes to students' engagement and learning motivation, as observed by Feezel (2018). The study findings also reported that students felt safe within the school premises. Furthermore, respondents agreed that they had good relationships with their classmates, which corroborates the assertion by Wright (2017) that peer interactions shape academic and social experiences. The study found that extracurricular activities were available and encouraged. This aligns with Paul and White (2020), who found a positive correlation between participation in school activities and academic achievement. However, in Uganda, sports involvement is often associated with lower grades, suggesting a possible inverse relationship that warrants further investigation.

While students agreed that their school managed conflicts effectively, some students remained neutral, and others disagreed. This highlights some gaps in school conflict management, which could impact students' academic experiences, as suggested by Durisic and Bunijevac (2017). Similarly, the mixed responses regarding administrative responsiveness suggest room for improvement in student support structures. The findings indicate that peer interactions moderately contribute to academic performance. This is consistent with studies by Krishnan and Sequeira (2012), who noted that social interactions can be both supportive and distracting. Additionally, research by Quatman et al. (2001) and Zimmer and Ginerbec (2021) suggests that while dating can provide emotional support, excessive involvement may negatively affect academic achievement. Finally, discipline policies were perceived as fair by students, which aligns with the literature emphasizing the importance of a well-regulated learning environment by Krishnan and Sequeira (2012).

Learners' academic performance in secondary schools.

According to the OECD (2018), well-resourced schools and a supportive learning environment contribute significantly to student performance. The study in Mbarara City found that learners agreed that their school environment is conducive to learning. This aligns with the OECD findings, indicating that a positive school atmosphere facilitates academic success.

García and Weiss (2019) emphasized the role of teacher qualifications and student support in academic success. The study in Mbarara City found that students seek help from teachers when they don't understand something. This aligns with findings from Latin America, where teacher involvement is a critical factor in student performance. However, given that a few students were neutral, there

might be gaps in teacher availability or student willingness to seek help.

In Mbarara City, learners reported feeling motivated to do well in their studies. This supports global research indicating that motivated students perform better.

The study found that learners use additional learning resources, which supports the argument that students who utilize supplementary learning materials tend to perform better. Furthermore, regular attendance was another key finding, with students agreeing they attend classes regularly.

Despite the positive trends, some areas need attention, where only 65.7% of learners agreed they achieve good grades in exams, indicating that while motivation and attendance are high, actual performance may not always match.

Relationship between the school social environment and learners' academic performance in Secondary schools.

The strong correlation in Mbarara City further confirms that well-structured schools with conducive learning environments, effective teacher-learner interactions, and resourceful classrooms foster higher student achievement. The results support Alam Said et al. (2018) and Portes and Hao (2004), who argued that the school background significantly affects learners' academic performance. Their study suggests that academic achievement is a reflection of the teaching methodology, school facilities, and learner engagement. Similarly, Moghaddam et al. (2017) emphasized that schools are social institutions where students learn not only from teachers but also from their classmates and the school environment. The high correlation coefficients ($r = 0.644$ for learners and $r = 0.657$ for teachers) confirm this assertion, suggesting that when schools provide a supportive atmosphere, students gain academically and socially.

The findings from Mbarara City suggest that schools that invest in better infrastructure and learning environments experience higher academic achievement. The results are consistent with World Bank (2022), the availability of school facilities such as libraries, proper lighting, ventilation, and seating arrangements directly influences academic performance. If these conditions are poor, students tend to become demotivated and disengaged. Furthermore, Martha (2009) and Barr (2014) emphasized that the school system must function cooperatively for better learning outcomes. The significant correlation ($r = 0.657$, $p < 0.05$) between school social environment and learners' performance in this study supports their view that an integrated and well-managed school structure positively impacts student achievement.

The results in Mbarara City suggest that teacher effectiveness and planning contribute to an improved social environment, leading to better academic performance. The study findings also align with the World Bank (2022), which highlighted that teacher preparedness before lessons enhances classroom engagement and learner performance. When teachers plan lessons effectively, use diverse teaching methods, and manage the classroom environment well, students perform better academically. The strong correlation in Mbarara City suggests that schools that integrate visual learning techniques and modern teaching aids help students achieve better results. These findings are in line with Inayat and Ali (2020), who found that visual learning strategies enhance students' academic achievement. Visualization helps learners organize thoughts, retain information, and stay motivated. Additionally, York et al. (2015) emphasized that a certain level of stress is necessary for achievement, but excessive stress can lead to frustration. The study findings suggest that a well-balanced school environment that challenges students while providing adequate support leads to better academic outcomes.

Conclusions.

Based on the findings, it is concluded that the results confirm that a positive school social environment, including teacher support, peer relationships, extracurricular activities, and effective conflict management, plays a crucial role in students' academic performance. Based on the findings, it is concluded that students demonstrated high motivation, engagement, and resource utilization, however, areas such as exam performance and teacher-student interaction require improvement. It is concluded that there is a strong relationship between school social environments and learners' academic performance. Schools that prioritize a supportive learning environment, provide necessary facilities, and foster strong teacher-student relationships tend to have higher academic achievement rates.

Limitations.

The study faced limitations such as financial constraints, including transport and secretarial costs, which were managed by working within a strict budget. Time was also a challenge, requiring the researcher to forego other activities to meet the research timeline. Effective time and resource planning helped address these challenges.

Recommendations.

Based on the results, it is recommended that areas such as administrative responsiveness and balancing social engagements with academics require further attention to improve the school's social environment. Based on the findings, it is recommended that policies such as improved teacher training, better school resources, and structured academic support programs could further enhance student success. To further improve academic outcomes, schools should focus on: enhancing school infrastructure and learning resources; strengthening teacher preparation and classroom management; implementing reward-based motivation systems; and encouraging collaborative learning and social interaction among students.

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List of Abbreviations.

A-level	Advanced Level
CEO	City Education Officer
FY	Financial Year
HM	Headmaster
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
MoE	Ministry of Education
NSSC	National Secondary School Commission

Original Article

O'level Ordinary Level
SH School
SPSS Statistical Package for
 Social Sciences
UNESCO: United Nations
 Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
USE Universal Secondary
 Education.

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Data used in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author.

Authors contribution.

GWB designed the study, conducted data collection, cleaned and analyzed data, and drafted the manuscript, SB supervised all stages of the study from conceptualization of the topic to manuscript writing and submission. EA supported in study conceptualization, general supervision, and mentorship.

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