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Original Article

Influence of Teacher Competence on Pupils' Academic Achievement in Primary Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the impact of teachers' proficiency on pupils' academic performance in public primary schools in Gulu City. Using a mixed-methods approach with 210 participants (pupils, teachers, head teachers, and academic heads), data were collected through questionnaires and interviews. Findings indicated that pupils' performance was moderately better in formative assessments than in summative exams. Teacher proficiency in subject knowledge, classroom management, and social/moral conduct showed strong, significant positive correlations with pupils' performance. Qualitative results highlighted challenges such as large class sizes, limited resources, inconsistent teaching methods, and low parental involvement. Environmental factors had mixed effects: resources and class location correlated moderately with learning, but overcrowding and inadequate materials negatively affected performance. The study concluded that teacher proficiency significantly influences academic outcomes, and recommended professional development, reduced class sizes, improved resources, and enhanced parental/community involvement to boost pupil achievement in Gulu City's public primary schools

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INTRODUCTION

Education is crucial for sustainable development, and teacher proficiency plays a central role in shaping pupils' academic performance, particularly in public primary schools. Historically, academic performance has been linked to teacher competence, evolving from informal assessments to formalised, competency-based education systems. In Sub-Saharan Africa, including Gulu City, research shows that teacher proficiency in content knowledge, pedagogy, and classroom management strongly influences learner outcomes. Uganda's UPE policy has expanded access to schooling, but low academic performance persists due to gaps in teacher training, inadequate instructional practices, and limited professional support. Using Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) as a framework, this study defines academic performance as learners' ability to understand, apply, and communicate knowledge facilitated by effective teaching, and teacher proficiency as encompassing content mastery, pedagogy, professional development, and contextual adaptability. In post-conflict Gulu City, challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, insufficient resources, and limited professional development exacerbate learning gaps, highlighting the need to strengthen teacher capacity to improve educational outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the expectation that pupils in public primary schools should achieve high academic performance through instruction by proficient teachers, many pupils in Gulu City perform below national benchmarks. This underperformance is linked to gaps in teacher proficiency, including limited pedagogical skills, inadequate mastery of subject content, and insufficient professional development, compounded by challenges such as large class sizes and limited resources. The study investigates how teacher proficiency affects pupils' academic outcomes, aiming to provide insights for targeted interventions and professional development to improve teaching quality and student performance.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the extent to which teachers' proficiency affects the academic performance of pupils in public primary schools in Gulu City.

Specific Objectives

This study aimed to:

- Establish the relationship between teachers' proficiency and academic performance in public primary schools in Gulu City.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- What is the relationship between teachers' proficiency and academic performance in public primary schools in Gulu City?

Scope of the Study

The study examined the relationship between teacher proficiency and pupils' academic performance in public primary (UPE) schools in Gulu City, Northern Uganda, covering the period 2020–2024. Gulu City, about 340 km from Kampala, is bordered by Lamwo, Pader, Nwoya, and Oyam districts. The research focused on both pupils and school administrators to capture diverse perspectives on teaching quality and its impact on academic outcomes. The chosen five-year period allowed analysis of recent trends, including post-COVID-19 educational recovery and national policy reforms affecting UPE schools.

Significance of the Study

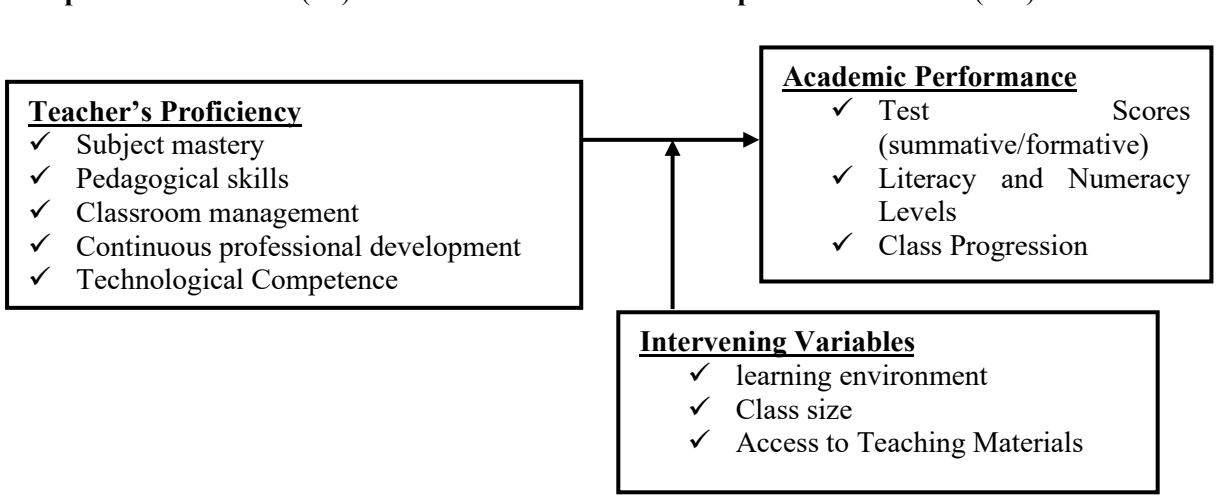
The study is guided by Shulman's (1987) Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) theory, which links teacher proficiency to pupil academic performance. Teacher proficiency is viewed as multidimensional, including content knowledge,

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pedagogical skills, classroom management, continuous professional development, and technological competence. Academic performance is measured through learning outcomes such as test scores, literacy and numeracy achievement, and progression rates. The framework suggests that higher teacher proficiency improves instruction quality, learner engagement, and supportive learning environments, while contextual factors like class size, learning environment, and resource availability may moderate or mediate this relationship.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Showing the Assumed Relationship Between Teachers' Proficiency and Pupil Academic Performance in Primary Schools in Gulu City



Source: *Adapted with modifications from Shulman's (1987) Theory of Pedagogical Content Knowledge*

This conceptual framework guides the study by illustrating the assumed causal relationship between teachers' proficiency and academic performance. It helped in shaping the research design, data collection, and analysis by focusing on how variations in teacher proficiency accounted for differences in pupils' performance in public schools within Gulu City.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents the theoretical review and review of literature pertinent to the relationship between teacher proficiency and pupil academic performance in public primary schools. The review is structured to provide theoretical foundations, synthesise empirical studies, and identify gaps in existing research.

Relationship Between Teachers' Proficiency and Academic Performance in Public Primary Schools

Research from high-income countries consistently demonstrates a strong relationship between teacher proficiency and student academic achievement. Chetty et al. (2017) found that effective teachers positively influence not only short-term test scores but also long-term educational attainment and economic outcomes. However, much of this evidence is derived from secondary or urban schooling contexts, limiting its applicability to public primary schools in resource-constrained environments.

Studies from Sub-Saharan Africa reinforce the importance of teacher proficiency but reveal notable contextual gaps. For instance, Adu (2019) established that teacher mastery of subject content and pedagogy significantly predicted science

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achievement in Nigerian secondary schools. Yet, limited research explores this relationship in the foundational years of primary education, which are critical for developing basic literacy and numeracy skills.

In Kenya, Mutua and Kiamba (2018) found that teacher in-service training is associated with improved literacy and numeracy outcomes among primary school learners. Nevertheless, much of the existing evidence remains correlational rather than causal, largely due to methodological limitations such as cross-sectional study designs, small sample sizes, and a lack of longitudinal follow-up.

Teacher motivation also emerges as an important moderator of the relationship between proficiency and learner achievement. Khan et al. (2025) demonstrated that motivated teachers in Pakistan were more likely to apply learner-centred strategies that enhance student outcomes. However, the interplay between motivation, proficiency, and academic performance remains insufficiently examined, particularly in low- and middle-income country (LMIC) settings where resource constraints may shape teacher behaviour.

Meta-analyses by Hattie and Zierer (2017) identify teacher effectiveness as the most influential school-based factor affecting student learning. Yet these reviews often lack disaggregated data specific to public primary schools in developing countries, limiting the generalizability of their findings. This underscores the need for context-sensitive research that examines teacher proficiency within diverse educational environments.

In summary, although global evidence supports a strong positive association between teacher proficiency and academic performance, more rigorous, longitudinal, and context-specific studies are required in public primary schools of LMICs. Such research should identify which dimensions of teacher proficiency most significantly influence foundational learning outcomes.

Despite well-established evidence linking teacher proficiency with learner performance in high-income and secondary education contexts, research focusing on public primary schools in low- and middle-income countries remains limited and predominantly correlational. Few studies disaggregate specific components of teacher proficiency, such as content knowledge, pedagogical skills, motivation, or digital literacy, to determine which most strongly influence academic outcomes. The mediating roles of teacher motivation and collaborative professional development are insufficiently explored, and limited attention has been given to how school-level contextual factors (e.g., resource availability, leadership, classroom conditions) moderate the proficiency–performance relationship. These gaps underscore the need for more rigorous and contextually grounded research in primary school settings.

METHODOLOGY

This section presents the methodology employed in conducting the study. It details the research design, geographical study area, target population, sample size, sampling techniques, sources and methods of data collection and analysis, quality control measures including validity and reliability, and ethical considerations. Each methodological choice was guided by the research objectives and the need to obtain reliable, relevant, and comprehensive data.

Research Approach

This study employed a mixed research approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative approach was essential for collecting numerical data that could be statistically analysed to measure variables such as academic performance and teacher proficiency. Meanwhile, the qualitative approach provided rich, descriptive data by capturing participants' experiences, opinions, and contextual factors through interviews and open-ended questions. Combining these approaches allowed the researcher to obtain a more complete and nuanced

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understanding of the study phenomena, addressing both the "what" and the "why" aspects. According to Cummings (2018), this mixed-methods approach enhances the richness and validity of research findings by enabling triangulation, thereby reducing bias and increasing confidence in the results.

Research Design

The study utilised a cross-sectional survey research design, incorporating a descriptive design which involves collecting data at a single point in time to examine the current status of variables within the population. This design was appropriate as it enabled the researcher to capture a snapshot of existing conditions and perceptions in public primary schools without the need for longitudinal follow-up. The cross-sectional design supported the integration of both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, facilitating a comprehensive analysis of the relationships between variables during the study period. Cummings (2018) notes that cross-sectional designs are effective for descriptive and correlational studies, making them suitable for exploring factors influencing academic outcomes and teacher proficiency in the selected schools.

Target Population

The target population for this study comprised head teachers, directors of Heads of Academics, class teachers for primary seven and primary four, as well as pupil leaders from the same classes. These respondents were selected from all 41 public primary schools in Gulu City. Each school represented a unit of analysis, while the individual teachers and pupils formed the units of inquiry. The decision to involve a range of stakeholders within the school environment was made to ensure diverse and comprehensive perspectives. Head teachers and academic directors provided institutional-level insights into policies, staffing, and performance monitoring, while class teachers contributed information on day-to-day teaching practices and challenges. Pupil leaders were included to represent the learners' perspective on the academic environment and learning experiences. By covering all public primary schools in Gulu City, the study aimed to achieve representativeness and variability, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings.

Sample Population

Based on Chloromethane, & Sintao (2021) table for determining sample size, a sample of 246 comprising 41 head teachers, 41 deputy head of academics, 82 teachers and 82 pupil leaders was drawn from the 41 public primary schools in Gulu City.

Table 1: Showing the Sample Size and Sampling Techniques for the Study

S/N	Category of Population	Target Population Size	Sample Size	Sampling Technique
1	School Head-Teachers	41	41	Purposive sampling
2	Head of Academics	41	41	Purposive sampling
3	Teachers	242	82	Simple Random Sampling
4	Pupil leaders	380	82	Stratified Random Sampling
	Total	**704**	**246**	

Source: *Primary Data (2020)*

Sampling Techniques

The study used a combination of purposive and random sampling to select participants. Purposive sampling targeted school head teachers and heads of academics due to their strategic roles in management, teacher supervision, and performance monitoring, making them key sources of qualitative insights. Simple random sampling was employed to select classroom

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teachers and pupil leaders from Primary Four and Seven, with head teachers and classroom teachers assisting to ensure each eligible participant had an equal chance of selection. This mixed approach balanced the depth of information obtained from knowledgeable administrators with the representativeness and generalizability provided by random sampling of teachers and pupils.

Data Collection Methods

To gain a holistic understanding of the research problem, the study adopted both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, consistent with the mixed-methods research approach. The tools employed included structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative methods were used to identify trends, measure variables, and analyse the relationships between teacher proficiency and academic performance. In contrast, qualitative methods explored the contextual and experiential dimensions underlying these variables. This methodological triangulation enhanced the validity, reliability, and comprehensiveness of the findings (Meydan & Akkaş, 2024).

Questionnaire Survey

Structured questionnaires were administered to classroom teachers and pupils to obtain standardised data on their experiences, perceptions, and performance indicators. The questionnaires consisted primarily of closed-ended questions to allow for quantifiable analysis and comparability across respondents. This method was particularly suitable for collecting data from a large sample within a limited timeframe. Items addressed key themes such as academic performance, teaching effectiveness, moral conduct, and instructional practices.

Interview Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with head teachers and heads of academics to collect in-depth qualitative data. This method allowed for flexible, open-ended discussions that captured the nuanced perspectives of educational leaders on issues such as teacher evaluation, professional motivation, classroom discipline, and academic performance. The semi-structured format enabled the interviewer to probe for clarification and explore emergent themes while maintaining focus on key topics.

Data Collection Instruments

Two primary instruments were developed to guide data collection: a questionnaire guide for collecting quantitative data and an interview guide for qualitative data. These tools were carefully designed based on the study objectives, relevant literature, and expert feedback to ensure content validity and alignment with the mixed-methods framework. Employing both instruments enabled triangulation, enhancing the credibility, dependability, and depth of the research findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed for classroom teachers and pupil leaders to collect structured, measurable data. It included closed-ended items organised into thematic sections focusing on teacher professionalism, academic performance, instructional strategies, and pupil engagement. Likert scale questions were incorporated to quantify attitudes and perceptions, facilitating subsequent statistical analysis.

Interview Guide

The interview guide was developed for use with head teachers and academic heads to collect qualitative data that would complement the findings from the questionnaire. It consisted of open-ended questions structured around key areas such as school leadership, teacher supervision, pupil performance monitoring, and resource allocation. The guide allowed the interviewer to explore respondents' experiences and perspectives in-depth while maintaining alignment with the study's thematic concerns.

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Quality Control

To ensure the accuracy, credibility, and trustworthiness of the study findings, rigorous quality control measures were implemented during the development and administration of the research instruments. These measures focused on evaluating both the validity and reliability of the data collection tools, namely the questionnaire and interview guides. Validity ensured that the instruments accurately measured the intended constructs, while reliability ensured consistency and stability of the measurements across different contexts and respondents.

Validity of Research Instruments

Validity was ensured through face, content, and construct validity. Face validity involved expert review to confirm that items were clear, relevant, and appropriate. Content validity was assessed using the Content Validity Index (CVI), with three education experts evaluating the instruments; the study achieved an average CVI of 0.96, indicating strong content validity. This confirmed that the research instruments accurately represented the constructs under investigation and were suitable for the study's educational context.

Reliability of Research Instruments

Reliability refers to the consistency and stability of an instrument in measuring a concept. In this study, Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire, with all constructs scoring above the acceptable threshold of 0.70 (ranging from 0.73 to 0.95) and an overall average of 0.87, indicating strong reliability. For qualitative data, credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability were ensured through prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checking, consistent use of interview guides, detailed documentation, thick contextual descriptions, and reflexivity, collectively enhancing the trustworthiness and rigour of the findings.

Data Analysis

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques in alignment with the mixed-methods research design. This dual strategy allowed for a robust understanding of the research problem by complementing numerical patterns with in-depth insights from participant narratives. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics**,** while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and key themes emerging from interview responses.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data obtained through structured questionnaires were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0**.**

The study objective**,** which aimed *"to determine the relationship between teachers' proficiency and pupils' academic performance"*, was analysed using inferential statistical methods**.** This included correlation analysis to determine the strength and direction of relationships. These techniques were selected due to their capacity to test hypotheses and generalise findings across a wider population (Creswell, 2014).

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with head teachers and heads of academics were analysed using thematic framework analysis**.** The process included transcription, coding, categorisation, and the identification of emerging themes aligned with the research objectives. This approach facilitated the interpretation of subjective experiences, institutional practices, and contextual challenges faced in UPE schools. For instance, themes such as "teacher motivation" and "instructional support" were used to interpret the impact of teacher behaviour on student outcomes.

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The thematic analysis helped to triangulate findings from quantitative data, adding depth and contextual richness to the study. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is effective in capturing complex phenomena and organising qualitative information into meaningful insights.

Administration Procedures

Before commencing data collection, the researcher followed formal procedures to gain institutional access to carry out the study. Upon receiving approval, the school head teachers were contacted to inform them about the study, seek their consent and arrange appropriate schedules for data collection. These procedures ensured compliance with institutional protocols and facilitated smooth engagement with participants in the selected schools.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were adhered to ensure the protection, dignity, and autonomy of all participants. Informed consent was obtained from each participant after explaining the purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits of the study. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were made aware of their right to withdraw at any point without penalty, in line with the ethical guidelines outlined.

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly upheld. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all responses were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes. To minimise misunderstanding, research instruments were developed in official English, the primary language of instruction in public primary schools, and pre-tested them for clarity and cultural appropriateness. These ethical measures aimed to ensure that participants were treated with respect and that the data collected were handled with integrity and care (Bryman, 2016).

Assumptions of the Study

Several assumptions underpinned this study. First, it was assumed that all respondent head teachers, classroom teachers, and pupils would respond truthfully and honestly to the research instruments. This assumption was critical to ensure the integrity and validity of the findings. Second, the study assumed that participants possessed sufficient comprehension of the questionnaire and interview content. Given that the instruments were developed in official English, the language of instruction in UPE schools, it was expected that participants would understand and respond appropriately. Third, the researcher assumed that teachers 'proficiency, assessed through teaching quality, classroom management, and moral conduct, would influence pupil academic performance. This assumption guided the study's conceptual framework and informed the analysis of relationships between teacher behaviour and student achievement. Lastly, it was assumed that the school environment, including leadership, policy, and learning resources, remained stable during the study period, allowing for reliable comparisons across different schools.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

Reliability refers to the consistency and stability of an instrument in measuring a concept. In this study, Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire, with all constructs scoring above the acceptable threshold of 0.70 (ranging from 0.73 to 0.95) and an overall average of 0.87, indicating strong reliability. For qualitative data, credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability were ensured through prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checking, consistent use of interview guides, detailed documentation, thick contextual descriptions, and reflexivity, collectively enhancing the trustworthiness and rigour of the findings.

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FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the study based on the data collected from respondents in UPE schools in Gulu City. The analysis focuses on establishing the relationship between teachers' proficiency and pupils' academic performance; and fourth, to determine the relationship between the school environment and pupils' academic performance.

The data were systematically organised and analysed to provide insights into the objective. The section also began with a description of the demographic characteristics of the respondents to provide context for the subsequent analysis.

The Relationship Between Teachers' Proficiency and Pupils' Academic Performance in Public Primary Schools in Gulu City

This section examined the relationship between various dimensions of teachers' proficiency and the academic performance of pupils in UPE schools in Gulu City. The guiding research question was: What is the relationship between teachers' proficiency and pupils' academic performance in UPE schools in Gulu City?

Table 4: Relationship between Teachers' Proficiency and Academic Performance

Correlations					
relationship between teachers' proficiency and pupils' academic performance		**(1)**	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(4)**
1. Teaching quality	Pearson Correlation	1			
	Sig. (2-tailed)				
	N	218			
2. Classroom Management	Pearson Correlation	.840**	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000			
	N	210	218		
3. Moral and Social Conduct	Pearson Correlation	.950**	.915**	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		
	N	210	210	210	
4. Academic Performance	Pearson Correlation	.039	.017	.023	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.565	.804	.734**	
	N	210	210	210	

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

Content Mastery (Teaching Quality) and Pupils' Academic Performance

The findings revealed a very strong and statistically significant positive relationship between teaching quality and pupils' academic performance (< 0.01). This implies that teachers who demonstrated deep mastery of subject content, responded effectively to pupils' questions, and communicated ideas clearly and confidently had a strong impact on learners' academic outcomes. The data suggests that when instruction is coherent, interactive, and delivered with clarity, pupils are better able to understand, engage with, and retain information, ultimately performing better in assessments. Teachers with subject competence can tailor instruction to pupils' needs, explain difficult concepts in simple terms, and inspire learner confidence.

Qualitative interviews reinforced this quantitative relationship. A head teacher from Laroo Division explained, *"Our best-performing pupils are taught by teachers who know the subject inside out. They make learning fun and easy to follow."* A classroom teacher added, *"When I explain well, and pupils ask questions freely, they grasp the material faster. You see it in their results."* These comments highlight how pupils' academic performance is shaped not only by content coverage but also by how it is delivered. In some schools, particularly those with teachers trained in

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modern pedagogical methods, pupils were more interactive, alert, and active during lessons. One teacher in Pece observed, *"We sometimes use role plays and storytelling. It keeps pupils alert and helps them remember."* These practices illustrate how high-quality teaching, supported by creativity and subject command, enhances academic performance in Gulu City's public primary schools.

Classroom Management (Pedagogical Skills) and Pupils' Academic Performance

The finding showed a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between classroom management and pupils' academic performance. The findings showed that effective classroom management through structured rules, clear routines, appropriate seating arrangements, and timely lesson delivery creates a learning environment conducive to academic success. When teachers are consistent, proactive, and firm in managing behaviour and time, pupils are more likely to remain focused, complete tasks, and engage positively with the learning process.

Qualitative responses mirrored this. One classroom teacher shared, *"I arrange my pupils in a U-shape. It helps me see everyone and control noise. Since I started doing that, even the slow learners pay attention."* A head teacher noted, *"When teachers come on time, enforce classroom rules, and involve pupils in setting expectations, the class runs smoothly, and results improve."* In overcrowded classrooms, where over seventy pupils might be seated, discipline becomes more challenging. Yet some teachers adapt by implementing innovative approaches. One teacher from Bardege explained, *"I use group leaders to help manage behaviour. It's not perfect, but it helps."* These narratives reveal how classroom management strategies are critical for academic performance, especially in resource-constrained environments like Gulu City.

Teachers' Moral and Social Conduct (Continuous Professional Development) and Pupils' Academic Performance

The analysis also identified a moderate but statistically significant positive relationship between teachers' moral and social conduct and pupils' academic performance ($r = 0.734^{**}$, $p < 0.01$). Teachers who modelled ethical behaviour, dressed professionally, refrained from alcohol and drug use, and treated pupils with respect and care were found to positively influence pupils' engagement and academic commitment. Pupils tend to look up to teachers as role models, and when teachers exhibit upright behaviour, learners are more likely to emulate positive habits, attend school regularly, and take their education seriously.

Qualitative findings emphasised this point strongly. A senior woman teacher shared, *"If a teacher comes drunk or dresses inappropriately, pupils lose respect and attention drops. But when you act with dignity, they follow your example."* Another teacher recounted, *"Pupils often tell me, 'Madam, we want to be like you.' That makes me careful about how I behave."* These remarks point to the centrality of moral conduct in shaping the school climate. Teachers who maintain professionalism contribute to safe, respectful learning spaces. One LC1 Chairperson noted, *"We've had cases where teachers fought in public or used abusive language. After intervention and behaviour change, performance at the school improved."* These examples show that teacher behaviour both inside and outside the classroom has a direct bearing on academic performance.

The availability of teaching and learning materials emerged as a foundational factor that influences teachers' proficiency and pupils' academic success. While not directly captured in the correlation coefficients, it consistently underpinned the relationships explored above. Many head teachers and classroom teachers reported a persistent shortage of textbooks, visual aids, and instructional materials. This lack constrained lesson planning, interactive teaching, and pupil participation.

A head teacher stated, *"Teachers often have to improvise because we don't have enough books.*

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Sometimes, four pupils share one textbook." Teachers noted that this forces them to rely on talk-and-chalk methods, which limit pupil engagement. In technical and science subjects, the shortage is more acute. A teacher in Layibi said, *"Teaching science without apparatus is like teaching swimming without water."* Furthermore, disparities were noted between urban and peri-urban schools, with some schools enjoying NGO support while others lacked even basic chalk.

Physical infrastructure also played a role. Dilapidated classrooms, leaking roofs, and inadequate desks demotivated both teachers and learners. A teacher lamented, *"We sit on bricks, and pupils write on laps. It affects how we teach and how they learn."* These qualitative experiences illustrate how material constraints diminish instructional quality, regardless of teacher competence.

Another critical factor that affected teacher proficiency and, consequently, pupil academic performance was class size. The quantitative findings indicated that while not statistically isolated in this study, class size mediated other variables like classroom management and teaching quality. Teachers described classes of over seventy pupils as overwhelming, limiting their ability to provide individualised support or conduct meaningful assessments.

A classroom teacher in Pece division shared, *"I teach 75 pupils in Primary Five. I can't mark all their books every day, and I don't know each child's progress."* Overcrowding also worsens discipline issues. One teacher said, *"The noise is unbearable. I sometimes lose my voice shouting. By the end of the day, I am drained."* Despite this, some schools have adopted makeshift solutions, such as splitting classes, using group work, or rotating attendance. However, as a head of academics noted, *"Even if we want to split classes, we lack enough staff and classrooms."* These challenges underscore the urgent need for policy reforms on teacher recruitment and infrastructure investment.

Parental and community engagement was another theme emerging from the qualitative data that significantly impacted teacher performance and learner outcomes. Teachers expressed concern about the low involvement of parents in their children's education. A head teacher observed, *"Parents rarely attend PTA meetings or monitor homework. That demoralises teachers."* This absence of partnership weakens reinforcement of learning at home and diminishes the sense of shared responsibility.

Moreover, negative attitudes toward formal education in some communities undermined pupil motivation. A teacher from a peri-urban school stated, *"Some parents tell pupils to go to the garden instead of school. They think education is a waste of time."* To counter this, some schools had begun community sensitisation efforts. A head teacher noted, *"We invite parents for class days. When they see what children are learning, they get more involved."* These efforts have shown promise, although sustained engagement remains a challenge.

Finally, the study highlighted that teacher motivation and access to professional development had a strong bearing on teaching quality and academic performance. When teachers attended workshops, received supportive supervision, and had platforms for peer learning, their delivery improved markedly. A head of academics explained, *"Teachers who attend CPDs [continuous professional development] come back with energy and new ideas."*

Conversely, demotivation due to poor pay, large workloads, and lack of recognition hindered performance. A classroom teacher shared, *"We work hard, but salaries are delayed, and there is no appreciation. Sometimes, you feel like giving up."* Some schools tried to boost morale through peer recognition and informal incentives, but systemic challenges remained. Furthermore, abrupt teacher transfers disrupted continuity. One teacher recalled, *"They transferred our best English teacher just before PLE. The pupils suffered."* To sustain gains, stakeholders

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emphasised better planning, welfare support, and structured career development.

This study strongly affirms that teacher proficiency reflected in teaching quality, classroom management, and moral conduct has a statistically significant and practical influence on pupils' academic performance in UPE schools across Gulu City. These findings are further supported by robust qualitative evidence from the lived experiences of teachers, school leaders, and community members. Together, the data points to the urgent need for investment in teacher training, classroom resources, infrastructure, and community engagement to ensure sustainable academic improvement. As one head teacher aptly concluded, *"When you support teachers, you support the future of our children.*

DISCUSSIONS

This section presents a comprehensive discussion of the findings in relation to the study objective.

Relationship between Teachers' Proficiency and Pupils' Academic Performance

The quantitative findings of this study revealed a very strong and statistically significant positive relationship between teaching quality and pupils' academic performance ($r = 0.950^{**}$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that teachers who demonstrate mastery in their subject areas, provide clear explanations, and engage pupils in interactive learning significantly enhance pupil academic outcomes. These results align with Darling-Hammond et al. (2020), who argued that effective instruction hinges on teachers' command of both content knowledge and pedagogical strategies, enabling them to adapt lessons and support diverse learners. Similarly, in the Ugandan context, Nambusi & Kisubi (2024) Enhancing Pupils' Learning Outcomes through Classroom Communication Teacher (CCT) Support in Uganda: A Comprehensive Review. (2021) highlighted that UPE schools with better-qualified teachers consistently outperform those with less-trained staff. Thus, the findings in Gulu City confirm literature asserting that teacher quality is a core determinant of learner success (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Kyeyune & Nakabugo, 2021).

In addition, the study identified a strong positive relationship between classroom management and pupils' academic performance ($r = 0.915^{**}$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates that structured and orderly classrooms significantly enhance pupils' concentration, reduce disruptions, and allow effective delivery of instruction. These findings echo the work of Turyatemba et al. (2022), who noted that even highly knowledgeable teachers lose up to 40% of instructional time due to poor classroom management, leading to diminished learning outcomes. Thus, the current findings highlight that effective classroom leadership, routines, and behavioural expectations are not just supplementary skills but essential components of instructional proficiency. As Konstantopoulos & Shen (2023) also observed, improvements in these areas contribute directly to better academic achievement among pupils.

Furthermore, the analysis found a moderately strong but statistically significant relationship between teachers' moral and social conduct and pupils' academic performance ($r = 0.734^{**}$, $p < 0.01$). Pupils tend to perform better when teachers model ethical behaviour, foster respectful relationships, and act as role models. This supports Al Doghan & Sundram (2024), who emphasised that teachers' professional integrity fosters a positive classroom culture and enhances learner engagement. In the Ugandan context, Muwanga-Zake and Kibukamusoke (2024) highlighted that teachers' respect for pupils, consistent discipline, and emotional support increased school attendance and attentiveness, reinforcing the importance of moral leadership in academic success. Therefore, beyond cognitive skills, the ethical and interpersonal dimensions of teacher conduct significantly shape the academic landscape in UPE schools in Gulu City.

The combined results of the study confirm that teachers' proficiency, defined across teaching

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quality, classroom management, and moral conduct, bears a significant and positive relationship with pupils' academic performance. These findings are in line with the literature from Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) and Nye et al. (2015), which emphasised the multi-dimensional nature of teacher effectiveness. They also highlight the importance of continuous professional development, ethical training, and effective classroom practices to improve learner outcomes. The alignment between the findings and existing scholarship reinforces the need for policy interventions aimed at strengthening teacher preparation and support systems within Gulu City's primary education sector (Datzberger, 2018; &Turyatemba et al., 2022).

The qualitative data underscored a critical shortage of teaching and learning materials as a major obstacle to effective teaching in UPE schools in Gulu City. Head teachers and classroom teachers consistently pointed to the scarcity of textbooks and teaching aids, which forced many to improvise or rely on lecture-based teaching. These insights corroborate Datzberger (2018), who noted that disparities in educational resources across Ugandan schools lead to unequal learning experiences. Teachers' ability to implement interactive and inclusive teaching strategies was compromised, undermining proficiency and, by extension, pupil performance. Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) similarly observed that material resources are foundational to translating teacher knowledge into effective instruction. Hence, improving teaching resources is essential for enhancing both teacher competence and academic outcomes.

Classroom overcrowding emerged as a pervasive barrier to effective teaching. With some classes exceeding seventy pupils, teachers were unable to offer individualised attention, employ differentiated instruction, or conduct formative assessments. This scenario reflects Turyatemba (2023), who reported that large class sizes diminish instructional time and increase classroom indiscipline, even in contexts with skilled teachers. Although some schools attempted mitigation strategies such as group work or class splitting, these efforts were constrained by infrastructure and staffing shortages. These findings contrast with studies in better-resourced contexts, such as those referenced by Nye (2015), where smaller class sizes enhance learning outcomes. Therefore, in Gulu City's UPE schools, addressing class size and staffing levels is indispensable for optimising teacher proficiency and learner achievement.

The findings also highlighted the limited involvement of parents and the community in supporting education, which negatively affected teachers' morale and pupils' academic engagement. Teachers and head teachers lamented that many parents were disengaged, rarely attending school meetings or following up on pupils' progress. This resonates with Muwanga-Zake & Kibukamusoke (2024), who found that parental apathy in northern Uganda correlates with poor academic performance. In contrast, research by Al Doghan & Sundram (2024) emphasised the role of supportive home environments in reinforcing school learning. The community's scepticism toward formal education in some areas undermined teacher efforts, showing the need for community engagement and sensitisation programs. Therefore, enhancing parental involvement is not merely a supplementary effort but a core requirement for improving teacher effectiveness and learner outcomes in UPE schools.

Lastly, teacher motivation and professional development were identified as critical enablers of teaching proficiency. Respondents stated that regular training, peer learning opportunities, and recognition significantly improved teaching quality. This aligns with Darling-Hammond et al. (2020), who stressed that continuous professional development is a pillar of teacher effectiveness. Conversely, low motivation resulting from inadequate pay, lack of support, and poor working conditions led to absenteeism and underperformance. Nambusi and Kisubi (2024) also linked low teacher morale in Uganda's public schools to poor pupil outcomes.

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The findings suggest that targeted investment in teacher welfare and career growth will improve instructional quality and thus learner achievement. These insights emphasise the cyclical relationship between teacher support and academic performance, a theme consistently echoed in global and local education literature (Gray, 2024; & Namanya, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The study established a statistically significant positive relationship between teacher proficiency and pupil academic performance. Teachers with higher qualifications, more experience, and access to training were better able to engage pupils, assess learning needs, and manage diverse classrooms effectively. These findings affirm that teacher quality is a key determinant of educational success, especially in resource-constrained settings like Gulu City's UPE schools. It further implies that improving teacher proficiency could serve as a direct lever for enhancing learning outcomes.

Recommendations

Given the clear link between teacher proficiency and academic outcomes, education policymakers should revise teacher recruitment, deployment, and promotion frameworks to emphasise both qualifications and demonstrable teaching competence. Schools should also foster mentorship systems where experienced teachers support novice staff, promoting peer learning and professional growth.

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