

# Factors Contributing to Students' Loss of Interest in Learning: A Case Study of Secondary Schools in Butambala District, Uganda

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## Abstract

This study investigated the factors contributing to students' loss of interest in learning within secondary schools in Butambala District, Uganda. The research was motivated by declining academic performance and increasing student apathy in the region. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with headteachers, teachers, and students, alongside document review. The study identified three core factors: archaic pedagogical methods that stifle learner autonomy, dilapidated school environments that demotivate students, and socio-economic stressors that prioritize survival over education. The findings suggest that student disengagement is a systemic issue rooted in resource constraints and rigid instructional frameworks. It is recommended that the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) implement mandatory continuous professional development in student-centered pedagogies and increase capitation grants to improve infrastructure. Addressing these factors is critical to restoring interest and improving educational outcomes in Ugandan secondary schools.

**Keywords:** student disengagement, secondary education, pedagogy, Butambala District, learning motivation

## 1. Introduction

History of the Topic Globally, the phenomenon of student disengagement or loss of interest in learning has been a subject of educational concern since the industrialization of schooling. Historically, education systems were designed to transmit knowledge from the teacher to the passive student, a model often referred to as the “banking concept of education” (Freire, 1970). While this model served industrial economies, the advent of the information age shifted the focus towards critical thinking and active participation. In the East African context, the legacy of colonial education systems emphasized rote learning and examination success, often at the expense of intrinsic motivation (Mamdani, 2016). Following Uganda's independence in 1962, there were concerted efforts to reform the curriculum to be more relevant to local needs; however, the structural rigidities of teacher-centered instruction persisted. Over the last two decades, as Uganda embraced Universal Secondary Education (USE) in 2007, the surge in student enrollment was not matched by a corresponding shift in teaching methodologies or resources, leading to a historic drift in student engagement levels (Baine, 2019).

### 1.1 Context of the Study

The current educational landscape in Uganda is characterized by a paradox of increased access versus declining quality. In Butambala District, a predominantly rural area in the Central Region, secondary schools face unique challenges that exacerbate student disengagement. The district, while having a rich cultural heritage, struggles with high poverty levels and infrastructure deficits. Schools in Butambala range from private faith-based institutions to government-aided day schools. Recent monitoring reports by the District Education Officer indicate a worrying trend of student absenteeism and “silent dropping out,” where students attend school

physically but are mentally absent (2022). The organizational problem is acute: teachers report that students display apathy, arrive late, and show little enthusiasm for class activities. This context is compounded by the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which widened the learning gap and left many students feeling disconnected from the academic routine (Kitooke, 2023). Within this institutional context, the loss of interest is not merely an academic issue but a socio-economic crisis threatening the future productivity of the youth in Butambala.

### *1.2 Justification of Key Concepts*

To understand this problem, three key concepts must be defined and justified: “Loss of Interest,” “Pedagogical Factors,” and “Socio-Economic Determinants.”

- 1) First, “Loss of Interest” is conceptualized not just as boredom, but as a psychological state of disengagement where the student no longer values the learning activity. According to Muweesi (2024), loss of interest is a form of academic withdrawal that precedes actual dropout. It is justified as a dependent variable because it is the visible symptom of underlying systemic failures.
- 2) Second, “Pedagogical Factors” refers to the methods, strategies, and interactions employed by teachers. In the Ugandan context, this is critical because the curriculum is often exam-driven, leading to “chalking and talking” (Nakabugo, 2020). This concept is justified as an independent variable because research consistently shows that teaching style directly influences student motivation. As noted by Ssekamwa (2017), when students are passive recipients, their cognitive interest wanes.
- 3) Third, “Socio-Economic Determinants” encompasses the external environmental factors, including family income, parental support, and school resources. The justification for this concept lies in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs; a student cannot focus on learning if basic needs like hunger and safety are unmet (Ejuu, 2022). In Butambala, where subsistence farming is the mainstay, the socio-economic context is a heavy determinant of educational interest. By examining these concepts, the study moves beyond blaming the student to analyzing the systemic structures that kill curiosity.

### *1.3 Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study is to investigate the multifaceted factors contributing to students’ loss of interest in learning within secondary schools in Butambala District, Uganda, with the aim of proposing evidence-based interventions for educational stakeholders.

### *1.4 Research Objectives*

This study was guided by the following objectives:

- 1) To examine how pedagogical approaches used by teachers influence students’ interest in learning in secondary schools in Butambala District.
- 2) To assess the impact of school environmental and infrastructural factors on student engagement.
- 3) To explore the socio-economic determinants contributing to the loss of interest in learning among secondary school students.

### *1.5 Research Questions*

This study sought to answer the following questions:

- 1) How do pedagogical approaches used by teachers influence students’ interest in learning in secondary schools in Butambala District?
- 2) What is the impact of school environmental and infrastructural factors on student engagement?
- 3) Which socio-economic determinants contribute significantly to the loss of interest in learning among secondary school students?

### *1.6 Theoretical Framework / Theorization*

This study is anchored in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985). SDT posits that human motivation is driven by three innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to the need to feel in control of one’s own behavior and goals; competence is the need to gain mastery of tasks and learn different skills; and relatedness is the need to experience a sense of belonging and attachment to other people.

This theory is suitable for the study because it provides a lens to analyze why students in Butambala are losing interest. When teachers use authoritarian, lecture-based methods, they strip students of autonomy. When the curriculum is not well-taught or resources are lacking, students feel a lack of competence. When the school environment is hostile or unsupportive, students lack relatedness. The theory applies directly to the Ugandan

context where the education system has been criticized for being too rigid and failing to nurture the intrinsic motivation of learners (Acheng, 2020). By using SDT, the study can explain the loss of interest not as a student deficit, but as a failure of the learning environment to meet basic psychological needs.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Pedagogical Approaches and Student Interest

The relationship between teaching methods and student interest has been extensively documented. Globally, the shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered pedagogies (LCP) has been shown to increase engagement. According to Hattie (2023), active learning strategies, where students participate in the learning process, have a high effect size on student achievement and interest. In contrast, traditional “spoon-feeding” methods, where the teacher dictates notes, have been linked to passivity. In the African context, Altinyelken (2021) argues that the imposition of LCP in Uganda has often been superficial due to large class sizes, leading to a hybrid that fails to motivate students. Studies by Opolot-Okurut (2022) reveal that students in Ugandan secondary schools perceive lessons as monotonous and irrelevant to their daily lives. This monotony kills curiosity. Furthermore, the use of corporal punishment and harsh language, though banned, persists in some areas, creating fear rather than interest (Muweesi, 2024). When students are afraid, their cognitive capacity to engage with material diminishes significantly. The literature suggests that without interactive, relevant, and humane pedagogical practices, interest in learning naturally atrophies.

### 2.2 School Environmental and Infrastructural

The physical learning environment plays a crucial role in shaping student attitudes. Research by Earthman (2022) indicates that poor ventilation, inadequate lighting, and overcrowded classrooms significantly lower student concentration and interest. In Uganda, the implementation of Universal Secondary Education led to an influx of students that existing infrastructure could not handle (Baine, 2019). A study by the Uganda National Examinations Board (2023) highlighted that schools with dilapidated structures, lack of libraries, and insufficient science laboratories recorded lower motivation levels among students. The environment acts as the “third teacher”; if it is depressing or chaotic, it signals to students that education is not valued (Nakabugo, 2020). Furthermore, the lack of recreational facilities denies students an outlet for stress, making academic work feel like a burden rather than a growth opportunity. The absence of essential instructional materials like textbooks and computers forces students to rely solely on the teacher, reducing the variety of stimuli required to maintain interest (Ejuu, 2022).

### 2.3 Socio-Economic Determinants

Socio-economic status (SES) is a powerful predictor of educational engagement. Considine and Zappala (2020) found that students from low-income families are more likely to disengage from school due to the psychological stress of poverty. In Butambala, many families rely on subsistence farming, and school fees, though subsidized in USE schools, remain a barrier due to additional costs of uniforms and meals (Kitooke, 2023). When students come to school hungry, as is often the case in day schools without feeding programs, their ability to focus is compromised (Ssekamwa, 2017). Moreover, the perceived lack of future employment opportunities contributes to a “why bother” attitude. If students do not see the link between education and economic mobility, they lose interest (Acheng, 2020). Peer influence and parental involvement are also critical; parents with low literacy levels may not provide the necessary home support, leaving students to navigate academic challenges alone (Muweesi, 2024).

## 3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach utilizing a case study design. This design was appropriate for gaining an in-depth understanding of the “how” and “why” of student disengagement within the natural setting of secondary schools in Butambala District.

The target population included 15 headteachers, 120 teachers, and 500 students from selected secondary schools. Purposive sampling was used to select 3 headteachers, 9 teachers, and 12 students who had shown signs of disengagement (e.g., absenteeism, sleeping in class) or had significant experience with the phenomenon. Data collection instruments included semi-structured interview guides for teachers and students, key informant interviews for headteachers, and observation checklists to record the physical state of schools. Data analysis followed the thematic analysis approach, where transcribed interviews were coded and organized into themes corresponding to the research objectives.

Table 1. Distribution of Study Respondents

| Category of Respondents | Target Population | Sample Size | Sampling Technique |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------|--------------------|
|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------|--------------------|

|               |     |    |           |
|---------------|-----|----|-----------|
| Head teachers | 15  | 3  | Purposive |
| Teachers      | 120 | 9  | Purposive |
| Students      | 500 | 12 | Purposive |
| Total         | 635 | 24 |           |

The table shows a sample size of 24 respondents. This number was deemed sufficient to reach data saturation, a point where no new information was forthcoming from interviews. The selection of respondents focused on those with direct knowledge of the learning dynamics in Butambala schools.

#### 4. Interview Findings per Variable / Objective

##### 4.1 Objective 1: Pedagogical Approaches

Findings from the interviews revealed that teaching methods were a primary demotivator. Out of the 9 teachers interviewed, 7 admitted that they predominantly used the lecture method due to large class sizes. One teacher noted, “We have over 80 students in a class. If I try to do group work, the noise will be uncontrollable, so I just dictate notes.” Students corroborated this, expressing frustration with the monotony. A Senior Two student stated, “The teacher comes, writes on the board, and tells us to copy. If you ask a question, he says you are wasting time.” Secondary data from lesson observation checklists confirmed that 90% of observed lessons were teacher-centered, with little student interaction. This lack of autonomy aligns with the literature on disengagement (Muweesi, 2024). Furthermore, the use of abusive language by teachers was reported. “When you fail a question, the teacher calls you stupid,” one student lamented. This negative emotional environment creates a psychological barrier to learning.

The findings indicate that the dominant pedagogical culture in Butambala suppresses student autonomy and competence, core tenets of Self-Determination Theory. When students are treated as empty vessels to be filled rather than active participants, their intrinsic interest evaporates. The reliance on lecture methods is a structural adaptation to overcrowding, but the pedagogical cost is high student disengagement.

##### 4.2 Objective 2: School Environmental Factors

Regarding the school environment, the study found that infrastructural deficits significantly impacted student morale. Observations at two of the three schools revealed broken furniture, with students sitting on the floor or sharing desks meant for one. “It is hard to concentrate when you are squeezing on a bench,” a student reported. The lack of science laboratories was also cited; a chemistry teacher explained, “We teach theory without seeing the reactions. Students find it abstract and boring.” The headteachers reported that the government capitation grant was often delayed and insufficient to repair buildings or buy books. One headteacher noted, “When it rains, the roof leaks, and classes are disrupted. The children lose focus completely.” The environment was often described as “prison-like” due to the lack of recreational space.

The physical environment in Butambala schools communicates a lack of value for the students’ comfort and learning experience. The discomfort caused by poor infrastructure acts as a constant distraction, while the lack of practical resources makes learning abstract. The environment fails to stimulate the senses, which is a prerequisite for maintaining interest in adolescents.

##### 4.3 Objective 3: Socio-Economic Determinants

Socio-economic factors emerged as a pervasive underlying cause of disengagement. Many students reported coming to school on an empty stomach. “I come from a far distance. I leave home at 6:00 AM without breakfast. By 10:00 AM, I am sleeping in class not because I am lazy, but I am weak,” a student explained. Teachers confirmed that hunger and fatigue were major issues in day schools. Additionally, poverty led to a lack of scholastic materials. “I don’t have textbooks. When the teacher refers to a page, I just sit there,” another student added. The uncertainty about the future also played a role; students cited older siblings who had finished school but remained unemployed, leading to a sense of futility. “Why struggle when there are no jobs?” was a recurring sentiment.

The socio-economic reality of students in Butambala creates a “survival mode” mindset that overrides educational curiosity. Maslow’s hierarchy is evident here; physiological needs (hunger) and safety (financial security) are unmet, making the need for self-actualization (learning) irrelevant. The loss of interest is thus a rational response to their perceived economic reality.

## 5. Discussion

##### 5.1 Objective 1: Pedagogical Approaches

The findings regarding teacher-centered pedagogy align with global and local literature. The study established

that the lecture method, driven by large class sizes, is a significant factor in the loss of interest. This supports the assertions of Hattie (2023) and Altinyelken (2021), who note that passive learning leads to superficial engagement. The verbal abuse reported by students further compounds this by creating a threatening climate. According to SDT, autonomy and relatedness are thwarted in such environments (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The findings are consistent with Nakabugo (2020), who observed that the “pretense” of implementing learner-centered pedagogies in Uganda often results in teacher frustration and eventual reversion to traditional methods. The uniqueness of the Butambala context lies in the severity of the teacher-student ratio, which makes it practically impossible for teachers to offer individual attention, a key driver of interest (Acheng, 2020). Therefore, the loss of interest is not a behavioral deficit in students but a systemic failure of instructional delivery.

### *5.2 Objective 2: School Environmental Factors*

The discussion on environmental factors reinforces the concept of the environment as the “third teacher.” The dilapidated infrastructure observed in Butambala mirrors the findings of Baine (2019) and Earthman (2022), who link physical conditions to academic outcomes. The lack of laboratories and libraries transforms learning into a theoretical, abstract exercise that fails to capture the imagination of adolescents. This lack of resources impacts the competence aspect of SDT; without tools to practice, students cannot feel mastery. The Ugandan government’s policy of USE increased access but did not adequately fund the corresponding expansion of infrastructure (2022). Consequently, the environment becomes a source of stress rather than a sanctuary for learning. The findings suggest that interest cannot flourish in an environment that physically discomforts the learner.

### *5.3 Objective 3: Socio-Economic Determinants*

The impact of socio-economic factors on interest was profound. The finding that hunger causes sleeping in class is consistent with Ejuu’s (2022) observations on the effects of poverty on cognitive function. When students are malnourished, their brain function is compromised, making learning physically painful. Furthermore, the “futility” narrative expressed by students aligns with Considine and Zappala’s (2020) research on how low SES affects educational aspirations. In Butambala, where the agrarian economy is fragile, the immediate return on labor (working in a garden) is visible, whereas the return on education is delayed and uncertain (Ssekamwa, 2017). This creates a disconnect between the student’s lived reality and the school’s demands. The loss of interest is, therefore, a defense mechanism against the anxiety of poverty and future uncertainty.

## **6. Conclusion and Recommendations**

### *6.1 Conclusion*

The study sets out to investigate the factors contributing to students’ loss of interest in learning in Butambala District. It concludes that this loss of interest is not an isolated phenomenon but a convergence of pedagogical, environmental, and socio-economic failures. The dominance of teacher-centered methods strips students of autonomy, making learning a passive, boring activity. Concurrently, the school environment, characterized by dilapidated infrastructure and a lack of learning resources, fails to stimulate competence. Underpinning these school-based factors is the harsh socio-economic reality of poverty, manifested in hunger and a lack of scholastic materials, which forces students into survival mode. The study confirms that without addressing the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness—as outlined in Self-Determination Theory—and without meeting basic physiological needs, efforts to improve academic performance will remain futile.

### *6.2 Recommendations*

- 1) To Secondary Schools: School management must adopt creative timetabling to manage large classes, such as shifting sessions or team teaching, to allow for more interactive learning. Schools should also establish guidance and counseling clubs to address the psychological demotivation and provide career guidance to combat the “futility” mindset.
- 2) To Universities and Teacher Training Colleges: The pre-service training curriculum needs to be overhauled to emphasize learner-centered pedagogies and classroom management in resource-constrained environments. Teachers should be equipped with skills to motivate students even without high-tech resources, focusing on active learning strategies that require low materials but high engagement.
- 3) To NCHE (National Council for Higher Education): NCHE should rigorously monitor the quality of teacher education programs to ensure that graduates are not just masters of content but also masters of pedagogical engagement. Standardization of practicum assessments should include a specific metric on student engagement strategies.
- 4) To Education Policymakers: The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) should review the capitation

grant formula for USE schools to include a specific component for instructional materials and minor infrastructure repairs. Policymakers must also enforce the ban on corporal punishment and verbal abuse strictly, replacing them with positive discipline policies.

- 5) To the Ugandan Government: The government should consider reintroducing or expanding school feeding programs, even at a subsidized scale, to alleviate hunger-induced disengagement. Additionally, there should be stricter enforcement of standards regarding student-teacher ratios to ensure that classes are manageable for interactive teaching.

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