

Private School Management Practices and Students' Academic Performance in Iringa Region, Tanzania: A Qualitative Study of Catholic-Owned Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This study explored how private school management practices influence students' academic performance in selected Catholic-owned secondary schools in Iringa Region, Tanzania. The study adopted a qualitative multiple-case study design involving four Catholic-owned secondary schools located in three districts of Iringa Region. A total of 63 participants were purposively and criterion-based selected, comprising school managers, heads of schools, academic masters/mistresses, school accountants, education officers, quality assurance officers, students, school board members, and parent representatives. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, documentary review, and non-participant observation, and were analysed thematically through within-case and cross-case analysis. The findings indicate that academic performance was shaped by interconnected management practices, particularly participatory school management, instructional supervision and academic follow-up, teacher commitment and motivation, structured academic routines and continuous assessment, supportive learning environments, and student and stakeholder participation. Effective management was found to extend beyond routine administration by creating organisational conditions that encouraged teacher commitment, student responsibility, accountability, and sustained attention to teaching and learning. The study concludes that strengthening instructional leadership, teacher management, academic monitoring, resource allocation, and stakeholder participation can contribute to improved academic performance in Catholic-owned secondary schools.

Keywords: Private school management, School leadership, Academic performance, Instructional supervision, Teacher motivation, Catholic-owned secondary schools, Tanzania.

1. Introduction

Education plays a central role in human development, social transformation, economic productivity, and sustainable development. However, the quality of education depends not only on curriculum content and classroom instruction but also on the institutional environment within which teaching and learning take place. School management constitutes an important component of this environment because management

decisions influence planning, staffing, instructional supervision, financial resource allocation, infrastructure, student welfare, accountability, stakeholder participation, and implementation of educational policies. The importance of leadership and management has received increasing international attention, with evidence indicating that effective educational leaders can influence learning by setting expectations, focusing on teaching and learning, fostering collaboration, and developing people [1].

Evidence from low- and middle-income countries further demonstrates that school management can contribute to improved educational outcomes. A systematic review of management interventions in low- and middle-income countries found that improvements in school management can positively affect student learning, although the magnitude and mechanisms of these effects vary across contexts [2]. This suggests that management should not be understood merely as an administrative function but as a process through which schools organise and coordinate human, financial, physical, and instructional resources to create conditions conducive to effective teaching and learning. Recent evidence from Tanzania similarly shows that school leadership culture is positively associated with students' academic performance, particularly through students' involvement in academic planning and decision-making, communication of academic progress, cooperation between teachers and students, and motivation [3].

The relationship between private schooling and academic performance has also attracted increasing empirical attention. In Tanzania, recent evidence based on administrative examination records for more than 635,000 students found that students who attended private secondary schools experienced positive learning gains relative to comparable students who switched from public to private schools [4]. However, evidence from East Africa cautions against attributing differences in performance automatically to private-school status, since part of the observed advantage may reflect differences in students' family backgrounds and selection into private schools [5]. These findings make the examination of how private schools are managed, rather than simply whether they are private, particularly important. Management practices involving teacher deployment, instructional supervision, time management, resource allocation, accountability, and student support may help explain differences in academic outcomes across private schools.

Effective private-school management involves a range of interconnected practices. These include strategic planning, instructional supervision, recruitment and retention of qualified teachers, teacher motivation and professional development, financial management, allocation of teaching and learning resources, student discipline, academic monitoring, communication, and stakeholder participation. Evidence from private secondary schools in Nigeria, for example, indicates a positive relationship between school management practices, including teacher behaviour and time management, and students' academic performance [6]. Similarly, research on school-based factors in Tanzania has identified weak school leadership, inadequate infrastructure, poor management of learning time, and imbalances in teacher allocation as factors associated with poor academic performance [7].

The Tanzanian education system provides an important policy context for examining these relationships. The *Education and Training Policy, 2014, 2023 Edition* provides the national framework for education and training, while the *Education Sector Development Plan 2025/26–2029/30* emphasises improving the quality, relevance, access, management, and effectiveness of education delivery. The current sector plan was developed through consultation with multiple stakeholders, including faith-based organisations and the private sector, reflecting the recognised contribution of non-government actors to education provision [8, 9].

Within this national context, school management has become an important area of empirical inquiry. A recent study conducted in Iringa Municipality examined school management strategies and effective supervision in relation to students' academic performance and demonstrated the relevance of management and supervision within the local educational context [10]. However, existing Tanzanian studies have largely concentrated on public schools or specific dimensions of management, particularly leadership and supervision. Comparatively less attention has been given to private and faith-based secondary schools and to the ways in which different management practices operate together to influence students' academic performance. The existing literature therefore provides limited contextual evidence concerning Catholic-owned private secondary schools in Iringa Region.

This gap is particularly important in Catholic-owned secondary schools because their management structures may involve several interconnected stakeholders, including school owners and religious authorities, school managers, heads of schools, teachers, school boards, parents, students, and government education officials. Such arrangements require coordination of responsibilities relating to strategic planning, staffing, financial management, infrastructure, academic supervision, student discipline, welfare, accountability, and institutional development. The interaction of these practices may either strengthen or constrain the ability of schools to create effective teaching and learning environments. The study document identifies these management dimensions as central to understanding academic performance in the selected Catholic-owned schools.

The issue is further reinforced by recent evidence showing that leadership capability remains an important determinant of students' academic achievement in Tanzania. A 2026 study of public secondary schools found a significant relationship between school leadership capabilities and students' academic achievement, with conceptual, technical, and interpersonal capabilities all contributing to performance [11]. Although this evidence comes from public schools, it provides an important comparative basis for examining whether similar management mechanisms operate within private and faith-based institutions.

Against this background, there is a need for an in-depth examination of the mechanisms through which private school management practices influence students' academic performance within their specific institutional contexts. Such an examination is particularly relevant in Iringa Region, where Catholic-owned secondary schools operate under different organisational settings while sharing a faith-based ownership structure. Understanding these mechanisms can provide evidence on how leadership, instructional supervision, teacher management, financial management, resource utilisation, stakeholder participation, academic monitoring, and student support contribute to educational outcomes.

Accordingly, this study explores how private school management practices influence students' academic performance in four Catholic-owned secondary schools in Iringa Region, Tanzania. The study examines the experiences and perspectives of key stakeholders involved in school management and teaching and learning in order to understand how management practices shape the conditions under which students learn and achieve academically. The study contributes contextual evidence that can inform private school managers, Catholic education authorities, school boards, government education officials, parents, and other stakeholders seeking to strengthen management systems and improve students' academic performance.

2. Literature Review

School management has increasingly been recognised as a multidimensional organisational practice that influences the quality of teaching, learning, and students' academic achievement. Rather than viewing

management as routine administration, contemporary educational research considers it a coordinated process involving planning, directing, supervising, motivating staff, managing instructional resources, and evaluating institutional performance. Empirical evidence from Tanzania demonstrates that effective school management creates organisational conditions that support improved teaching practices and stronger academic outcomes. Mwambene [12], in a qualitative study of secondary schools in Muheza District, found that staff motivation, resource supervision, and management strategies were closely associated with students' academic performance, indicating that school management influences learning through the effective coordination of institutional resources and personnel.

A growing body of research has focused specifically on the managerial competencies required of school leaders. In Morogoro Municipality, Mkude and Omer [13] investigated the influence of heads of schools' managerial skills on students' academic performance and reported that effective managerial practices were important in shaping academic success. Their findings emphasised that school leaders require competencies beyond administrative authority, including planning, coordination, communication, problem-solving, and instructional leadership. Similarly, recent evidence from Unguja, Zanzibar, showed that planning, directing, and supervision competencies collectively contributed to student achievement and improvements in school climate, reinforcing the argument that management effectiveness depends upon the integration of multiple leadership capabilities rather than isolated administrative functions [14]. Instructional leadership remains one of the most consistently identified management practices associated with students' academic performance. Pondamali and Mung'ong'o [15] found that head teachers in urban secondary schools in Morogoro employed instructional leadership practices such as monitoring teaching activities, supporting teachers, establishing academic goals, and promoting professional collaboration to enhance students' academic achievement. Complementing this evidence, Mtei [16] reported that effective instructional leadership involved communicating school goals, monitoring curriculum implementation, planning teaching and learning resources according to students' needs, and organising professional discussions among teachers. Together, these studies suggest that academic performance is strengthened when school management maintains continuous oversight of instructional processes rather than limiting leadership to administrative responsibilities.

The management of teachers also occupies a central position in educational effectiveness because teachers constitute the primary human resource responsible for curriculum implementation. Recruitment, retention, motivation, professional development, and supportive working conditions influence teachers' commitment and continuity within schools. Recent Tanzanian evidence indicates that teacher turnover contributes to declining academic performance by increasing absenteeism, disrupting instructional continuity, and reducing organisational stability [17]. Charles' study in Geita District demonstrated that schools experiencing high teacher turnover faced significant challenges in sustaining consistent teaching and learning, highlighting the importance of management strategies aimed at retaining qualified teachers. Beyond retention, teacher motivation has also been linked with improved educational performance. Research conducted in Tanzanian secondary schools has shown that supportive school administration, fair remuneration, conducive working environments, recognition, and opportunities for professional development positively influence teachers' commitment to their instructional responsibilities [18]. Although conducted within public secondary schools, these findings provide valuable insight for private schools because management practices concerning teacher welfare and motivation may similarly affect the quality of classroom instruction and ultimately students' academic outcomes.

Financial management and resource allocation represent another important dimension of school management. Private schools operate within environments where financial sustainability influences their capacity to recruit teachers, maintain infrastructure, provide instructional materials, and support students' learning activities. Kusioka [19], in a study of selected private secondary schools in Tanzania, found that successful academic performance depended substantially on the availability and effective utilisation of internal resources, including qualified teachers, learning facilities, and quality service delivery. The study further argued that private schools require management approaches that combine efficient resource utilisation with strategic institutional planning to sustain educational quality. These findings are particularly relevant because they shift attention from ownership itself toward the managerial processes through which available resources are transformed into educational outcomes.

The effectiveness of school management is also reflected in the supervision of instructional programmes and the utilisation of academic information for decision-making. Urio [20] compared best-performing and worst-performing secondary schools in Tanzania and found that leaders of high-performing schools consistently planned instructional activities, monitored students' progress, supervised classroom teaching, and maintained accountability among teachers. Conversely, poorly performing schools demonstrated limited instructional supervision and weak mechanisms for monitoring teachers' responsibilities. These findings suggest that regular academic monitoring and evidence-based managerial decisions are important pathways through which school management contributes to improved student performance.

Management practices extend beyond school leaders and teachers to include collaborative institutional structures involving school management teams and governing bodies. Mlola [21] found that school management teams played an important role in enhancing students' academic performance through coordinated planning, supervision, stakeholder engagement, and implementation of school improvement strategies. Likewise, evidence from Catholic secondary schools in Mbulu Diocese demonstrated that active and competent school boards contributed to institutional planning, infrastructure development, resource mobilisation, and academic improvement, illustrating the importance of collective governance within faith-based educational institutions [22]. These findings indicate that management effectiveness may depend upon the extent to which responsibilities are shared among different institutional actors rather than concentrated within a single administrator.

Research focusing on private schools further demonstrates that management practices may influence academic performance through organisational efficiency, accountability, and the effective management of instructional time. Abaika [23] examined private secondary schools in Nigeria and found a significant positive relationship between school management practices, particularly teachers' behaviour and time management, and students' academic performance. The study recommended stronger human capital management and proactive time management as essential strategies for improving educational outcomes within private institutions. Although conducted outside Tanzania, the findings provide comparative evidence that effective management practices remain central to private-school performance across different African contexts.

Collectively, the reviewed literature demonstrates considerable agreement that school management influences academic performance through interconnected mechanisms including leadership competencies, instructional supervision, teacher management, motivation, financial planning, resource allocation, academic monitoring, and stakeholder collaboration. However, the empirical literature also reveals an important limitation. Most Tanzanian studies have concentrated on public secondary schools, while studies examining private schools have frequently focused on individual factors such as resources,

leadership, or financial sustainability rather than investigating management practices as an integrated organisational system. Furthermore, relatively little contextual evidence exists concerning Catholic-owned private secondary schools in Iringa Region, where governance structures, faith-based ownership, school boards, managers, teachers, students, and parents collectively participate in institutional management. The present study addresses this empirical gap by exploring how private school management practices influence students' academic performance within selected Catholic-owned secondary schools in Iringa Region, thereby contributing context-specific evidence to the broader discourse on educational management and school effectiveness.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative multiple-case study design to explore how private school management practices influence students' academic performance in four Catholic-owned secondary schools located in three districts of Iringa Region, Tanzania. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enabled an in-depth examination of management processes and the experiences and perceptions of different stakeholders within their institutional contexts.

The study involved 63 participants selected purposively and through criterion-based sampling. Participants comprised 4 school managers, 4 heads of schools, 4 academic masters/mistresses, 4 school accountants, 3 district secondary education officers, 3 quality assurance officers, 1 regional education officer, 24 students, 8 school board members, and 8 parent representatives. This broad stakeholder representation enabled the study to capture multiple perspectives on management practices and their relationship with students' academic performance.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, documentary review, and, where appropriate, non-participant observation. Documentary evidence included relevant school records and academic performance information, such as continuous assessment records, internal examination results, and national examination evidence where accessible. The use of multiple data sources facilitated triangulation and strengthened the credibility of the findings.

Data were analysed thematically through within-case and cross-case analysis. Interview and focus group data were coded and organised into themes corresponding to management practices and their perceived influence on academic performance. Documentary and observational evidence were used to corroborate participants' accounts. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and appropriate institutional permissions, were observed throughout the study. The methodology was designed to provide a contextualised understanding of how management practices operate and influence academic performance across the selected Catholic-owned secondary schools.

4. Findings and Discussion

The analysis revealed that private school management practices influenced students' academic performance through several interconnected processes. These included participatory management, instructional supervision, teacher motivation, structured academic routines, continuous assessment, and the creation of supportive learning environments. The findings are presented thematically and discussed in relation to the empirical literature reviewed in Section 2.

Coordinated and Participatory School Management

Participants consistently associated academic performance with a management system that promoted collective responsibility among school managers, teachers, non-teaching staff and students. One school

manager explained:

“My school experiences a very good academic performance almost every year because we have established a system which promotes collective participation to all members at the school. The collective participation and responsibility is experienced to the whole school management team (SMT), to all workers and students as well.” (School Manager, School 1)

Another manager emphasised the importance of commitment and continuous follow-up:

“We have established a system which makes everyone in the school starting from teachers, non-teaching staff and students to be committed and work hard to achieve the goals. This has been possible through close follow-up to everything which we have planned to be done at the school.” (School Manager, School 4)

These accounts indicate that management was perceived as a collective process rather than a responsibility confined to school heads. This finding supports the argument by Firmina [12] that participatory management plays an important role in students’ academic performance in secondary schools in Iringa Region. It is also consistent with the literature reviewed by the study, which emphasises that involving different members of the school community can strengthen accountability, cooperation and commitment. The finding further agrees with recent Tanzanian evidence showing that leadership culture is associated with students’ performance through cooperation between teachers and students, students’ involvement in academic planning and decision-making, and motivation [3]. The convergence is important because the present study reaches a similar interpretation from a qualitative perspective within private Catholic-owned schools, whereas the earlier Tanzanian study examined high-performing public schools. Thus, the present findings suggest that participatory management may be relevant across ownership contexts, although its specific operation may differ between public and private institutions.

Instructional Supervision and Academic Follow-up

Instructional supervision emerged as another important mechanism through which management practices were perceived to influence academic performance. A teacher involved in school management stated:

“Our school is very organized and very committed in supervising every activity related to academics [and] enforce[s] teachers and students to work hard in all teaching and learning processes.” (Teacher, School 3)

Participants’ accounts indicate that supervision involved following up curriculum implementation, teaching activities and students’ academic work. This finding supports Urio [20], who found that leaders in better-performing Tanzanian secondary schools were more effective in planning and monitoring instructional programmes, whereas weak-performing schools demonstrated limited classroom supervision and weak accountability mechanisms.

The finding is also consistent with Mtei [16], who reported that instructional leadership involved setting and communicating academic goals, monitoring teaching and learning, planning resources according to students’ needs, and supporting teachers’ professional development. The present study therefore reinforces previous evidence that supervision contributes to academic performance not simply through control, but by ensuring that teaching and learning activities are implemented consistently.

However, the present findings add an important contextual dimension. Participants did not describe supervision as the responsibility of the head of school alone. Rather, it involved academic leaders, teachers and other members of the school management structure. This suggests that distributed supervision may be particularly important in private schools where maintaining academic standards is closely connected to institutional reputation and parental confidence.

Teacher Commitment and Motivation

Teacher commitment and motivation also emerged as important mechanisms. Participants indicated that management practices encouraged teachers to work towards improved academic outcomes. One teacher stated:

“In our school, teachers are committed to work hard because there is a reward for every good passes of grade ‘A’ and ‘B’ for every subject a teacher teaches.” (**Teacher, School 5**)

This finding supports the reviewed literature on teacher motivation, particularly the evidence that motivated teachers are more likely to demonstrate commitment to teaching responsibilities and that teacher motivation can influence students’ learning experiences [18]. It is also consistent with Mwambene [12], whose qualitative study in Muheza found that staff motivation, resource supervision and management strategies were among the practices associated with better academic performance.

The finding further corresponds with evidence from Tanzanian high-performing schools showing that teacher and student motivation was positively associated with academic performance [3]. However, the qualitative evidence in the present study helps explain how motivation may operate: participants described rewards, close follow-up and institutional expectations as mechanisms through which management encouraged teacher commitment.

This suggests that management influences students’ academic performance indirectly. The management practice does not directly teach students; rather, it shapes teachers’ commitment and instructional behaviour, which subsequently affects students’ opportunities to learn.

Structured Academic Routines and Continuous Assessment

Students’ accounts indicated that structured school routines and frequent academic assessments were important components of the management system. Participants described closely followed timetables, weekly and monthly tests, terminal and annual examinations, debates and group discussions as practices that maintained students’ academic engagement.

This finding supports Urio [20], whose study showed that effective management of instructional programmes involved timely planning and monitoring students’ academic progress. It is also consistent with Mtei [16], who found that instructional leaders who monitored teaching and learning processes and provided information on school progress contributed to stronger academic environments.

The present findings extend these studies by showing that students themselves experienced management through the organisation of their daily academic activities. Thus, a school timetable, assessment programme or academic meeting becomes a management mechanism when it is consistently implemented and monitored.

Continuous assessment was particularly important because it provides information about students’ progress. Management can use such information to identify students who require additional support, monitor teachers’ instructional effectiveness and adjust academic programmes. Therefore, the influence of management occurs through a continuing cycle of planning, implementation, assessment, feedback and corrective action.

Supportive Learning Environment and Student Responsibility

Participants also associated academic performance with the creation of a conducive learning environment. One school board member explained:

“Through cooperation with the teachers, we have established a system which makes everyone, including students themselves, to be responsible and work hard with academics. But also we worked very hard to ensure that the school environment is conducive for studying.” (School Board Member, School 2)

This finding supports the literature reviewed in Section 2 concerning resource management and school climate. Mtei [16], for example, found that instructional leaders were expected to plan and budget teaching and learning resources according to school priorities and students' needs. Similarly, recent research on school management competencies in Tanzania indicates that supervision can influence school climate through staff motivation, collaboration and the availability of learning resources.

The finding therefore suggests that management affects academic performance partly by creating the conditions within which teaching and learning occur. Infrastructure and learning materials alone do not guarantee achievement; their contribution depends on whether they are adequately managed, maintained and used for academic purposes.

Participants also described mechanisms through which students were encouraged to take responsibility for their own academic performance. One head of school explained:

"I have established a system which make student's government responsible in supervising and making sure their fellow students study hard. This made them to develop a habit of studying hard competitively."
(Head of School, participating school)

This finding is particularly consistent with the study by Mulokozi and Mwemezi [3], which identified students' involvement in academic planning and decision-making, cooperation and motivation as important elements of a positive leadership culture. It indicates that student participation can transform management from a top-down process into a shared responsibility for academic achievement.

Synthesis of the Findings

Across the themes, the findings demonstrate that management practices influenced academic performance through interconnected rather than isolated mechanisms. Participatory management created shared responsibility; instructional supervision ensured that academic plans were implemented; teacher motivation encouraged commitment; structured routines and continuous assessment maintained academic focus; and resource and learning-environment management provided supportive conditions for teaching and learning.

This interpretation is strongly supported by Mwambene [12], whose qualitative study found that schools with good management systems were characterised by effective supervision, staff motivation and academic planning. It also corresponds with Urio [20], who found that effective planning and monitoring of instructional programmes distinguished better-performing schools from poorly performing schools. More recent Tanzanian evidence similarly demonstrates that leadership and management competencies are associated with academic outcomes through planning, supervision, communication, cooperation and motivation [3, 14].

Nevertheless, the present findings contribute something different from much of the reviewed literature. Most of the supporting Tanzanian studies have focused on public secondary schools, whereas this study examines Catholic-owned private secondary schools and brings together the perspectives of multiple stakeholder groups. The findings therefore suggest that although the underlying management mechanisms planning, supervision, motivation, participation and resource utilization may be similar across school types, their implementation is shaped by the ownership and organisational context of the school.

Overall, the qualitative evidence indicates that private school management influences students' academic performance by creating and maintaining an institutional environment in which teachers are supported and supervised, students are academically engaged, resources are organised, and responsibility for achievement is shared. The evidence should not, however, be interpreted as establishing statistical

causation. Rather, it explains the mechanisms and experiences through which participants perceived management practices to contribute to academic performance.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that private school management practices play an important role in shaping the conditions under which effective teaching and learning take place in Catholic-owned secondary schools in Iringa Region. The findings indicate that academic performance is influenced not by a single managerial activity, but by the interaction of strategic planning, instructional supervision, teacher management and motivation, academic monitoring, resource allocation, student support, and stakeholder participation. Effective management therefore extends beyond routine administration to creating an organisational environment that promotes teacher commitment, student responsibility, accountability, and sustained attention to learning. This understanding is consistent with the study's view of management as an interconnected system through which human, financial, physical, and instructional resources are translated into educational outcomes. The study further highlights the importance of strengthening competent leadership, teacher professionalism, evidence-based academic monitoring, financial accountability, and meaningful stakeholder participation to support improved academic performance.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends that Catholic-owned secondary schools strengthen instructional leadership by institutionalizing regular lesson observation, academic meetings, examination analysis, teacher feedback, and timely academic interventions. School managers should enhance teacher motivation and retention through professional development, recognition, supportive supervision, and fair working conditions. Schools should also strengthen financial management and resource allocation by ensuring transparent budgeting, expenditure monitoring, and prioritization of teaching and learning needs. School boards should be empowered to participate actively in strategic planning, academic monitoring, accountability, and institutional development rather than functioning merely as formal governance structures. Furthermore, schools should strengthen student support and parental engagement to promote discipline, responsibility, welfare, and academic progress. Catholic education authorities should provide continuous leadership development in strategic management, instructional leadership, human-resource and financial management. Finally, government education authorities should strengthen supportive quality assurance and collaboration with private and faith-based schools to promote consistent educational standards and improved student outcomes.

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