

Collaborative Team Building Activities among Secondary School Teachers in Mbarara City

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Abstract

This study explored collaborative team-building activities among secondary school teachers in Mbarara City, Uganda. The study was guided by the specific objective of finding out the collaborative team-building activities conducted among secondary school teachers in Mbarara City. A qualitative phenomenological research design with an explanatory orientation was employed, as it enabled the researcher to capture in-depth information, explore nuanced experiences and understand the perspectives of various stakeholders. The study population comprised 339 respondents, namely 300 teachers, 38 head teachers and 1 City Education Officer, drawn from all 38 secondary schools in the study area, of which 24 were private and 14 were government secondary schools. A sample of 207 respondents, comprising 171 teachers, 35 head teachers and 1 City Education Officer, was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table alongside the principle of data saturation. Purposive sampling was used, and eligibility required at least one year of service in the respective school and willingness to provide informed consent. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with the City Education Officer and head teachers using an unstructured interview guide, and through 14 focus group discussions, each comprising 12 teachers drawn from different schools. Thematic analysis was used to code transcribed responses and cluster similar codes into broader themes, with participants' voices preserved through verbatim quotations. The findings revealed that schools conduct a wide range of activities, including games and sports, staff trips, end-of-year parties (chalk wash-down), internal and external workshops, social gatherings such as careers day, staff parties around colleagues' milestones, karaoke, music, dance and drama, and staff meetings held three times a term. These activities were largely annual and delegated to named offices, principally the welfare office and the academics office, while the City Education Department organised some at least once a term. Participation was motivated chiefly by enjoyment, and delivered improved social life, easier consultation and problem-solving, solidarity among teachers, and innovativeness. However, participation was constrained by lack of time, differences in interests, limited financial resources, heavy workload and mistrust. The study recommends that head teachers, in collaboration with the City Education Department, institutionalise collaborative team-building activities within the school calendar so that they occur at least once every term and are designed in affordable, school-based formats.

Introduction

Historical Background

World over, teacher collaboration has evolved over time. For example, in China, teacher collaboration has evolved through collectivist traditions and research on professional collaboration, inclusive practice and

structured teamwork within schools. Studies conducted since the 2010s highlight whole-school career development programs, lesson-study models and peer-support systems in Hong Kong and mainland China as mechanisms through which organised collaborative activities strengthen shared professional identity (Yu, 2024; Wong & Li, 2023). In the United States, teacher collaboration developed alongside reforms emphasizing professional learning communities, co-teaching models and interdisciplinary teams. Contemporary scholarship characterises professional learning communities as collaborative structures within schools that encourage teacher teamwork and ongoing professional education, typically featuring joint planning, shared evaluation of student data and collective reflection on practice (Khasawneh et al., 2023).

In Ghana, teacher collaboration emerged through collective professional organisation, notably following the establishment of the Teachers' and Educational Workers' Union in 1962, which fostered joint advocacy, shared professional development and a common identity among educators (TEWU, 2022; Anyanful & Asare, 2021). In Nigeria, the formation of the Nigerian Union of Teachers in 1972 united educators around shared professional goals and collective problem-solving across regions. In both countries, contemporary literature reports uneven access to collaborative platforms and regional disparities in resources, which limit participation in joint instructional planning and peer mentoring (Acheampong et al., 2023; Ogunode & Adebayo, 2023). In Uganda, collaborative activities have gained increasing analytical attention, with subject-based teams, peer observation, joint school improvement initiatives and participatory decision-making identified as the principal vehicles of teacher collaboration (MoES, 2022; Mugizi et al., 2023). The present study extends this line of inquiry to Mbarara City, where school histories and community networks shape how such activities are organised.

Theoretical Background

The study is anchored in experiential-learning perspectives on teacher collaboration. Evidence from outbound training grounded in experiential learning involving 78 teachers from three departments in a vocational high school, assessed through pretest posttest, participatory observation and in-depth interviews recorded an average increase of 49.4% in collaboration scores, with the greatest improvement in group processing, that is, teachers' capacity to evaluate and manage their teamwork reflectively (Cahyaningrum et al., 2025). The theoretical relevance of this framework lies in its insistence that collaboration is learned through structured shared experience rather than through instruction alone supporting the design of team-building activities that place teachers in joint tasks, joint planning and reflective debriefing.

Conceptual Background

For the purpose of this study, collaborative team-building activities refer to mental health support, professional development, and the creation of an enabling work environment among secondary school teachers. It is conceptualized as mental health support which is defined as access to medical facilities providing timely psychological care and counselling services offering confidential emotional guidance. Such provision reduces pressure on teachers and facilitates early detection of difficulties. (Gearhart et al., 2022). Professional development refers to opportunities for training and skill enhancement through workshops on pedagogy and modern teaching methods, alongside promotion opportunities based on merit and performance. (Avola et al., 2025). Creating an enabling work environment refers to the provision of necessary resources such as teaching materials and safe infrastructure, coupled with fair treatment through

equitable policies. The same body of evidence stresses that work conditions and workplace culture are essential to retaining teachers (Avola et al., 2025).

Contextual Background

In Mbarara City North, collaborative team-building activities take a wide variety of formal and informal forms: games and sports, staff trips, end-of-year parties (chalk wash-down), internal and external workshops, social gatherings such as careers day, staff parties marking colleagues' personal milestones, karaoke, music, dance and drama, and staff meetings held three times a term. Responsibility for organising them is assigned to named offices the welfare office and the academics office while at city level the education department arranges some activities at least once a term in collaboration with individual schools. Most activities, however, take place annually, which limits the frequency of organized staff interaction. Motivation to participate is driven primarily by enjoyment travel, music, dance and the pleasure of shared experience rather than by managerial directive. Reported benefits include improved social life, easier consultation between teachers and faster problem-solving, staff acting as one team, and greater innovativeness through the exchange of ideas. These accounts align with evidence that team-building activities in schools promote open communication and a positive working environment, with 90% of teachers in one qualitative study of seven elementary schools reporting that team building brought the faculty together and improved communication and school climate, while the remaining 10% regarded compulsory vertical team meetings during planning time as a waste of time (Edmonds, 2009).

Statement of the Problem

The problem rests on a straightforward logic: strong teacher communities improve instructional quality by about 20% and reduce turnover by nearly 30% (Li et al., 2022; Okeke & Mensah, 2023); but in Mbarara City, cohesion among teachers is poor. The supporting evidence marshalled for this claim is local and recent: 45% of schools in Mbarara City South lacked adequate teaching materials and 38% of teachers reported limited professional support, while heavy workloads affect nearly 60% of teachers and delayed pay and limited mental health services weaken collegial relationships (Metropolitan International University Journals, 2024; Kabanda & Byaruhanga, 2023).

The persistence of the problem is attributed to the weak design and delivery of collaborative team-building itself constrained mental health support, limited professional development opportunities, minimal participation in decision-making and insufficient acknowledgement of teacher efforts. Existing interventions, such as occasional workshops and social events, have not resolved it, and the consequences decreased motivation, increased burnout, higher turnover, and diminished instructional quality and student performance are already visible (Kyaligonza et al., 2023; Atuhaire & Turyahabwe, 2022). The study is therefore positioned as an exploration of how collaborative team-building activities shape social cohesion, with the stated risk that failure to address the gap will deepen the decline in teacher morale and educational outcomes both in Mbarara City and nationally.

Objectives of the Study

General objective: To explore the influence of collaborative team-building activities on social cohesion among secondary school teachers in Mbarara City.

Specific objective; To find out the collaborative team-building activities among the secondary school teachers in Mbarara City.

Methodology

Research Design; The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design with an explanatory orientation. This design was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to capture in-depth information, explore nuanced experiences and understand the perspectives of various stakeholders on the phenomenon under investigation. The phenomenological design allowed the generation of rich narratives from participants' lived experiences regarding collaborative team-building activities and how these shape social cohesion among secondary school teachers.

Study Population; The study population comprised 339 targeted respondents: 300 teachers, 38 head teachers and 1 City Education Officer. The 38 head teachers were included because the study covers all 38 secondary schools in the study area 24 private secondary schools and 14 government secondary schools and each school has one head teacher.

Determination of Sample Size; A sample size of 207 respondents was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table alongside the principle of data saturation. Participants were selected progressively, with focus group discussions conducted among teachers and key informant interviews held with head teachers and the City Education Officer. Data collection continued until no new themes or insights emerged. The inclusion of 171 teachers and 35 head teachers ensured representation of diverse experiences relevant to the phenomenon. The City Education Officer and head teachers were identified as the key persons who enforce collaborative team-building activities in Mbarara City North. It was anticipated that saturation would be achieved before covering the entire population of 339, thereby justifying the adequacy of the selected sample size.

Table 3.1: Category, population, sample size and sampling technique

Category	Population size	Sample size	Sampling technique
City Education Officer	1	1	Purposive sampling
Head teachers	38	35	Purposive sampling
Teachers	300	171	Purposive sampling
Total	339	207	

Sampling Techniques and Procedure; Using purposive sampling, teachers and head teachers were identified from the 24 private and 14 government secondary schools on the basis of their direct involvement in school administration, teaching and participation in collaborative team-building activities. Eligible participants included teachers, head teachers and the City Education Officer who had served in their respective schools for at least one year and were willing to provide informed consent. Individuals with less than one year of service, those not directly involved in activities related to the study, and those unwilling to participate were excluded. Eligible participants were invited through official permission granted by the City Education Office and school administrators, followed by direct invitations from the researcher. Data collection proceeded concurrently with analysis, and additional participants were recruited purposively until data saturation was achieved.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Interviews. An interview is described as a conversation between two or more people in which questions are asked by the interviewer to obtain facts or statements from the interviewee. Through this method the researcher collected data from 1 City Education Officer and 35 head teachers, mainly because it secured

a higher response rate and was effective for such respondents. Interviews were face-to-face and were conducted using an interview guide featuring unstructured questions, enabling the interviewer to probe critical points for in-depth insights. The approach aligned with qualitative goals by capturing nuanced perspectives without rigid structure, prioritizing depth over breadth.

Focus Group Discussions. Data were collected through focus group discussions facilitated by trained moderators using open-ended questions to stimulate in-depth dialogue. The 171 teachers were organised into 14 FGDs, each comprising 12 participants drawn from different schools to enhance diversity of views. Discussions continued until data saturation was reached (Wakelin et al., 2024; Özden, 2024).

Data Quality Control; To ensure rigour, the study enhanced validity through triangulation across multiple respondent categories and member checking to confirm the accuracy of interpretations. Reflexivity was maintained to recognise and minimise researcher bias. Reliability was strengthened by consistently applying the interview and focus group discussion guides and by engaging knowledgeable respondents. Data collection tools were pretested to refine questions, improve clarity and ensure relevance before the actual study. Conformability was maintained by developing questions directly from the research themes, using standardised probes and keeping an audit trail of revisions so that findings accurately reflect participants' views rather than researcher bias. Transferability was addressed by providing a detailed description of the guides, context and participant characteristics, allowing others to determine whether the findings apply in similar settings; documenting procedures clearly facilitates comparison and replication.

Data Collection Procedure; Following ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of BSU and authorisation from the City Mayor, participants were identified and invited. Teachers and head teachers from selected secondary schools were identified through official school records in collaboration with school administrators. Participants who met the inclusion criteria being a registered teacher or head teacher in the selected schools with relevant experience of the phenomenon were invited to participate. Those not directly involved in the selected schools, those unavailable during the data collection period, or those unwilling to provide informed consent were excluded.

Data Management and Analysis; Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis: transcribed responses from interviews and focus group discussions were systematically coded and organised into categories aligned with the study objectives. Similar codes were clustered into broader themes, and patterns and relationships across these themes were identified and interpreted. To enhance credibility and authenticity, participants' voices were preserved through relevant verbatim quotations, ensuring that findings remain grounded in the lived experiences captured during fieldwork.

Ethical Considerations; Ethical approval was obtained from the BSU Research Ethics Committee, and a formal introduction letter was presented to the relevant authorities; permission to conduct research in schools was sought from the City Education Office and school administrations, with authorisation granted before data collection. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of the right to decline participation or withdraw at any time without consequences. The study acknowledged potential psychological or social risks, such as discomfort when discussing workplace relationships, and minimised these through confidentiality, voluntary participation, respectful interviews, and allowing participants to skip uncomfortable questions. Pseudonyms and code numbers were used instead of real names; audio recordings, transcripts and consent forms were securely stored in password-protected electronic files and locked storage accessible only to the researcher and authorised research assistants.

Findings

Collaborative Team-Building Activities among Secondary School Teachers

Secondary schools in Mbarara City North were found to engage in a wide range of collaborative team-building activities, both formal and informal, which bring teachers together outside the routine of classroom teaching. The activities reported were games and sports, staff trips, end-of-year parties (locally referred to as chalk wash-down), workshops (internal and external), social gatherings such as careers day, staff parties organised around colleagues' personal milestones, karaoke, music, dance and drama, and regular staff meetings held three times a term.

Games and sports emerged as the most regularly held activity. One teacher explained: "As a team we compete, and the first activity we do is games and sports, because we normally have them occasionally." Another referred to co-curricular activities such as football matches and inter-classes where teachers come together to ensure learners participate. A head teacher described these events as a deliberate strategy to foster an inclusive environment where both instructional and administrative staff engage in a non-work setting, thereby deepening personal connections and professional trust. The City Education Officer added that the department participates in sports activities with teachers and schools, at school level and in activities held at the stadium and at national level. Because sport requires teachers to organise themselves as teams, it creates repeated opportunities for interaction, shared effort and collective identity.

Staff trips were undertaken for exposure and benchmarking. A teacher recounted a recent visit to China "Recently we visited China. It was very exciting, Guangzhou city" while another explained the learning logic: "We go there, copy, and then we come and implement." A head teacher noted that trips, workshops, sports and games allow staff to step outside the classroom environment and observe successful pedagogical models in other institutions, which fundamentally shifts their perspective on local instructional challenges. Another head teacher reported staff trips around the country, notably to national parks such as Kibale, Murchison Falls and Kidepo, intended to build collaboration and cohesion among staff.

End-of-year parties (chalk wash-down) were reported as annual staff celebrations. One head teacher described the practice: whenever UCE and UACE results are released, the teaching staff and administration have a get-together, go out, share a meal and drinks and celebrate success "in that way, we bond, come together, and get energised to perform well in the following year." Teachers described the same events as annual and colloquially as chalk wash-down. The informal and celebratory character of these parties allows teachers to relate outside the formal hierarchy of the staff room, softening role distinctions.

Workshops, both internal and jointly with other schools, were identified as a structured form of collaboration. One head teacher explained that schools invite other institutions for special groups for academic improvement. The City Education Officer reported that workshops bring together teachers from both private and government-aided schools, training them in teaching methods, the new curriculum and other relevant school-related activities.

Social gatherings such as careers day were reported to build staff relations. One teacher explained that social gatherings are used "for improving trust and morale", confirming that such events are understood as deliberate means of strengthening relationships rather than mere entertainment.

Staff parties and accompanying colleagues were described as occasions on which teachers support one another during personal milestones. A teacher explained: "Our staff member can happen to have a giveaway, and the graduation... Then we accompany such people." This expresses emotional solidarity

and belonging the affective dimension of cohesion, in which colleagues are members of a supportive community that shares in one another's joys and burdens.

Karaoke, music, dance and drama were identified as platforms for cooperation, through which teachers pool ideas and develop joint strategies for coping with stress and for innovating. One teacher explained that staff cooperate, share ideas and come up with strategies to solve challenges such as stress and to be innovative in the community.

Frequency of the Activities and Responsibility for Facilitating Them

Participants explained that team-building activities are organised annually rather than continuously, and that responsibility is assigned to specific offices rather than left to chance. One teacher stated: "It is annual, and the head taking charge of welfare is in particular responsible for that." Another noted that the dinner held after the release of UCE results is also annual and that the academics office is usually in charge. At city level, the City Education Officer reported that the department organises some activities at least once a term, sometimes taking responsibility itself and sometimes working with individual schools and their staff, so that activities are facilitated through collaboration between the education department and the schools.

Two features follow from these responses. First, frequency: because the activities are annual, teachers meet in an organised social capacity once a year rather than regularly, and although annual events such as end-of-year parties and the post-results dinner are significant occasions, the extended interval limits their contribution to sustained interaction. Second, responsibility: facilitation is vested in named offices the head taking charge of welfare and the academics office which indicates that team-building in these schools is deliberately planned and delegated rather than accidental, and can therefore be structured, expanded and scheduled more frequently.

Motivation to Participate, or Not to Participate

Participants' motivation was expressed largely through the benefits they attributed to the activities. Teachers were found to be motivated primarily by relational gain the desire to know colleagues better and to work with them more easily. One head teacher said they participate because "we come to get to know each other more", while another explained that participation makes it "easier for them to consult one another, hence solving problems." The City Education Officer framed participation in institutional terms, noting that engaging in team activities helps the department monitor what is taking place in schools, see how teachers are performing, identify challenges and gaps, recognise strengths and provide guidance where necessary.

Fun was identified as the primary reason teachers take part. One teacher explained: "We are motivated by the fun that usually... characterises these functions. For example, when we go for these trips in national parks, you know, touring, mountain climbing, those experiences with interacting with nature, having a look at wild animals, people who know how to swim, they go swimming, sharing views together." Music and dance were also a strong source of motivation: "At the end of the day, sometimes we crown our days with music, dances. So the fun basically is the one that motivates people." The appeal of team-building therefore lies in the enjoyment it gives rather than in any directive from management a significant finding, because it suggests that the affective and recreational character of an activity is what secures voluntary participation.

Benefits of Collaborative Team-Building Activities

The findings indicate that collaborative efforts significantly enhance teachers' professional commitment and productivity, since high levels of team coherence correlate directly with a stronger desire to engage in shared learning. Where schools foster collaborative environments, teachers report increased job satisfaction and a greater sense of ownership essential drivers of organisational commitment. Specific benefits reported were:

- **Improved social life.** "We come to get to know each other more and how we get to know each other moving away from school life, like getting to know our personal lives. We share issues, we help out ourselves, family, our problems, and all that stuff."
- **Improved communication and cooperation among teachers.** A head teacher explained that "teachers who participate in those social activities... it becomes easier for them to consult one another, hence solving problems" — easier consultation translates directly into faster problem-solving.
- **Solidarity among teachers.** Participants explained that the activities unite teachers and build a sense of togetherness, so that staff act as one team rather than as isolated individuals.
- **Innovativeness and creativity.** "We discover new things through such gatherings" — collegial gatherings function as informal learning spaces that expose teachers to perspectives and practices they would not otherwise encounter.

Challenges Teachers Experience

Despite these benefits, participants cited scheduling conflicts and the high **costs** associated with organising off-site retreats as significant barriers, and the time required to balance group initiatives with individual academic obligations created systemic tension that prevented consistent participation.

- **Lack of time.** "Sometimes you can fail to have time, for example, a party, and you find that teacher does not have time." The time factor limits participation even when the activity itself is attractive, suggesting that timing and scheduling rather than willingness is a central constraint.
- **Differences in interests.** A head teacher explained: "We have that individual difference... And you find that we are forming something, but we have different interests. And you find somebody does not take it serious." Divergent interests mean shared activities are valued unevenly.
- **Different financial inclinations (limited resources).** "That's why some people cannot come to such parties, because they have other challenges, and you find they cannot." Financial constraints mean participation reflects ability to pay rather than commitment to the team.
- **Mistrust.** Described as the most damaging challenge: "When you find that some members, they are not trusted, you start like an organization, like for saving, someone escapes, someone does what." Where members cannot be relied upon, willingness to cooperate in other areas is also weakened.

Discussion of Findings

The study found that schools conduct games and sports, staff trips, end-of-year parties, internal and external workshops, social gatherings such as careers day, staff parties around colleagues' milestones, karaoke, music, dance and drama, and staff meetings three times a term. These activities were not confined to professional matters; they extended into recreation, celebration and personal support, and it is precisely this informality that allowed teachers to relate beyond the formal hierarchy of the staffroom. The finding agrees with García Ramírez and colleagues, who established that team cohesion unites members,

minimises differences and strengthens group identity, and that strong friendships formed in cohesive teams enhance trust and communication.

Activities were described as annual, with the head taking charge of welfare responsible for some and the academics office in charge of the dinner held after the release of UCE and UACE results, while at city level the education department organises some activities at least once a term in collaboration with individual schools. This agrees with Nakirya, Mugizi and Kiryowa, whose study of 209 teachers in government-aided secondary schools in Kayunga District found that empowerment of subordinates by leaders and inspiration of leaders positively and significantly influenced teachers' team cohesion, although fair treatment was positively but insignificantly related to cohesion (Nakirya et al., 2025). It also agrees with Hulpia, Devos and Rosseel, who demonstrated that a cohesive leadership team and the maximum amount of support a teacher receives from the leadership team were the most important variables associated with organisational commitment and job satisfaction, with participative decision-making also positively related to commitment (Hulpia et al., 2009).

Teachers' motivation to participate was driven primarily by enjoyment fun, music, dance, travel and the pleasure of shared experience rather than by managerial directive. Participants cited trips to national parks, mountain climbing, observing wild animals, swimming, sharing views together and crowning the day with music and dance, alongside the relational gain of knowing colleagues better and finding consultation easier. This chimes with Börü, who observed that collaboration in school provides support to teachers, triggers professional cultures and increases teachers' tolerance of ambiguity, and with Skaalvik and Skaalvik, whose evidence shows that a positive social climate at school including social support and positive relations with colleagues is negatively related to teacher burnout, while time pressure predicts stress, emotional exhaustion and burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015).

Conclusions

It is concluded that secondary schools in Mbarara City North engage in a wide and varied range of collaborative team-building activities games and sports, staff trips, end-of-year parties, internal and external workshops, social gatherings such as careers day, staff parties around colleagues' milestones, karaoke, music, dance and drama, and staff meetings held three times a term and that these activities are deliberately planned and delegated to named offices such as the welfare office and the academics office, though most of them are organised on an annual basis rather than continuously. It is further concluded that teachers' participation is motivated chiefly by the enjoyment these activities provide, and that the activities deliver real benefits in the form of improved social life, easier consultation and problem-solving, solidarity among teachers, and innovativeness while participation remains constrained by lack of time, differences in interests, limited financial resources, heavy workload and mistrust among members.

Recommendations

Since the study established that the activities are largely annual while teachers' motivation depends on the enjoyment and relational value they derive from participation, head teachers, in collaboration with the City Education Department, should institutionalise collaborative team-building activities within the school calendar so that they occur at least once every term rather than only once a year, and should design them in affordable, school-based formats that do not require teachers to meet personal costs so that limited finances, heavy workload and the long intervals between activities do not exclude teachers from the very engagements intended to unite them.

Areas for Further Research

The manuscript reserves a dedicated section (5.5) for areas of further research following the conclusions and recommendations. Given the constraints the study itself identifies the annual rather than continuous rhythm of activities, and the exclusion of teachers by cost, timing, workload and mistrust the natural extension of the inquiry lies in examining whether more frequent and inclusive scheduling of collaborative team-building activities produces measurable differences in social cohesion over time, and in extending the exploration beyond Mbarara City North to other contexts.

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