

Fees Disparities and Students' Enrolment Patterns in Rural Private Secondary Schools in Isingiro South County, Isingiro District

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between Fees Disparities and student enrolment patterns in rural private secondary schools in Isingiro South County, Isingiro District. This paper was guided by the objective to assess the impact of Fees Disparities on student enrolment trends in rural private secondary schools in Isingiro South County. The study adopted a correlational research design, this design was appropriate because the study sought to establish the relationship between school fee disparities and student enrollment patterns in rural private secondary schools in Isingiro South County without manipulating any variables. The study targeted secondary school head teachers and household heads in Isingiro South County. To collect data, the study used two data collection methods; namely questionnaire survey and interview.

The finding of the study revealed the statistical correlation between fees disparities and enrollment trends was weak, qualitative evidence and survey data indicate that affordability remains a central factor in shaping access to private secondary education in rural areas and concluded that fee disparities in rural private secondary schools significantly affect student enrollment, affordability, and perceptions of education quality in Isingiro South County. Although statistical correlations were weak, qualitative evidence highlighted affordability as a key factor in enrollment decisions, confirming that fee disparities contribute to educational inequality and emphasizing the need for policy interventions to improve access and concluded that private schools in Isingiro South County adopt more moderate and flexible fee structures.

Keywords: Fees disparities; Student enrolment patterns; Rural private secondary schools; Isingiro South County; Uganda

Introduction

Education remains a cornerstone for socio-economic transformation, yet access to affordable and equitable education is still a global challenge. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education for all (UNESCO, 2015). Despite such efforts, financial barriers continue to limit access, especially in rural areas where household incomes are low. In Uganda, while the government has expanded Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Secondary Education (USE), the private sector continues to play a critical role in filling gaps left by underfunded public schools (Uganda National Planning Authority, 2019). However, fees in private schools vary significantly, creating disparities that affect enrollment and retention, particularly in rural districts such as Isingiro (UBOS, 2021).

In Isingiro District, poverty levels remain high, with the majority of households depending on subsistence farming and informal income sources. According to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2021), more than 30% of rural households earn below the national poverty line, limiting their capacity to afford high-fee private education. This situation has led to inconsistent enrollment patterns, where children are either frequently transferred between schools or withdrawn altogether due to financial challenges. Studies indicate that in Uganda, nearly 25% of secondary school-age children in rural areas do not enroll in private schools primarily due to unaffordable tuition costs (UNICEF, 2020). These statistics demonstrate the structural barrier posed by fee disparities, highlighting affordability as a determinant of educational access.

The problem leading to this study is rooted in the absence of standardized regulation for private school fees. Unlike public institutions, private secondary schools in Uganda independently set tuition rates based on their operational costs, facilities, and management decisions (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2022). As a result, tuition fees in rural Isingiro vary widely, with some schools charging as low as UGX 200,000 per term while others demand over UGX 500,000 (Field Data, 2025). This disparity means that children from wealthier families can access higher-fee schools perceived to offer better quality, while those from poorer households are relegated to lower-cost institutions or excluded entirely from private education. The resulting inequality undermines efforts to achieve equitable access to secondary education and perpetuates cycles of poverty and exclusion.

This study's third objective specifically sought to assess the impact of fees disparities on student enrolment trends in rural private secondary schools in Isingiro South County. Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) provides a useful lens for understanding this phenomenon, as it posits that education is an investment in future productivity and economic outcomes. Families weigh the immediate cost of school fees against the anticipated long-term benefits of education. However, in low-income rural settings, the high financial burden often discourages continued investment, leading to declining enrollment rates and higher dropout levels (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). Evidence from other East African countries confirms this pattern: in Kenya and Tanzania, fee disparities have been directly linked to enrollment fluctuations, with wealthier families dominating private schools while poorer households face limited options (Bold et al., 2019; Gachene, 2021).

Against this background, the current study investigated how variations in school fees shape enrollment patterns in Isingiro South County. The findings highlight that affordability, parental perceptions of educational quality, and financial stability are critical factors influencing whether students remain in or drop out of private schools. By focusing on a rural context, the study not only contributes to the literature on fee disparities and access but also provides evidence to guide

policymakers and school administrators in developing interventions that promote equitable access to quality education.

Literature Review

The relationship between fees disparities and student enrolment trends has received considerable attention in educational research. In developing countries, tuition costs are frequently identified as one of the greatest barriers to access. For example, Lewin (2015) observed that high private school fees in Sub-Saharan Africa restrict access for low-income families, particularly in rural areas where household incomes are generally lower. This is consistent with UNESCO (2020), which reported that affordability is a primary determinant of whether families enroll their children in private institutions. In Uganda, where more than 21% of the population lives below the poverty line, fee disparities directly contribute to inequalities in access to secondary education (UBOS, 2021).

Studies in Uganda and across East Africa show that high school fees not only reduce enrolment but also affect retention. Bold et al. (2018) found that in Kenya, families often withdrew children from high-fee private schools due to financial strain, leading to unstable enrolment patterns. Similarly, Nawangwe et al. (2018) reported that Ugandan parents preferred higher-fee schools for their perceived academic quality but were frequently unable to sustain payments, resulting in transfers and dropouts. These findings highlight that fee disparities not only shape initial access but also determine long-term stability of enrolment.

Research also underscores that the impact of fee disparities is not evenly distributed across demographic groups. Girls, in particular, are disproportionately affected. Lewin (2015) demonstrated that in households with limited resources, boys are often prioritized for schooling, while girls face higher dropout risks when fees rise. Unterhalter and North (2017) similarly found that fee disparities exacerbate gender gaps in education, especially in rural settings where cultural norms intersect with economic pressures. In Isingiro District, where subsistence farming is dominant, such disparities may intensify existing gender inequities in enrolment and completion rates (Mwine, 2021).

Fee disparities also influence parents' perceptions of educational quality. Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2018) noted that many families equate higher fees with better learning outcomes, even when empirical evidence does not always support this assumption. Lauterbach (2024) found no consistent correlation between high fees and improved academic performance in Ugandan private schools, yet parental belief in this link drives enrolment decisions. As a result, wealthier families often cluster in high-fee schools, while poorer households either enroll in lower-fee institutions with limited resources or fail to access private schooling altogether. This dynamic reinforces educational inequality across socio-economic lines.

Policy-focused research suggests that regulation and financial interventions can mitigate the impact of fee disparities. Bold et al. (2019) in Tanzania found that scholarships and fee subsidies significantly increased enrolment among low-income families, demonstrating the potential of targeted support mechanisms. In Uganda, however, fee regulation in private schools remains limited, leaving households vulnerable to inconsistent and often unaffordable tuition charges (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2022). Nakabugo et al. (2021) emphasized that without deliberate policy interventions, fee disparities will continue to shape enrolment trends, undermining national efforts to achieve equitable access to secondary education.

Overall, the reviewed literature highlights a consistent pattern: disparities in school fees create barriers to access, destabilize enrolment, and reproduce inequalities in rural education systems. However, few studies have examined these dynamics in localized contexts such as Isingiro South County. This study, therefore, addresses an important gap by analyzing how fee disparities directly impact enrolment trends in rural private secondary schools, contributing evidence to inform equitable education policies in Uganda.

Methodology

This study employed a correlational research design to examine the relationship between fees disparities and student enrolment patterns in rural private secondary schools in Isingiro South County, Isingiro District. The design was

appropriate because it allowed analysis of naturally occurring differences in school fees and enrolment without manipulating variables (Orodho, 2003).

The target population comprised head teachers of private secondary schools and household heads within Isingiro South County. From seven identified private schools, a purposive sample of five schools was selected to represent different governance types, fee structures, and operational durations. A total of 120 respondents participated, including 5 head teachers (purposively selected) and 115 household heads (randomly selected).

Data were collected using self-administered questionnaires for household heads and interviews with head teachers. The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions to capture affordability perceptions, enrolment decisions, and socio-economic characteristics. Interviews provided deeper insights into fee-setting practices and enrolment trends.

To ensure validity, the instruments were reviewed by experts and the Content Validity Index (CVI) was calculated, with values above 0.7 deemed acceptable (Amin, 2005). Reliability was tested using the split-half method and Pearson correlation, with coefficients above 0.7 considered reliable (Mugenda & Mugenda, 1999).

Data analysis combined quantitative and qualitative approaches. Descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, percentages) were used to summarize fee variations and enrolment patterns. Inferential statistics, including chi-square and regression analysis, were employed to test relationships between fee disparities and enrolment. Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed thematically to contextualize quantitative findings.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Bishop Stuart University Research Ethics Committee and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology. Respondents provided informed consent, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

Results and Discussions

Response Rate

A total of 120 respondents were targeted in the study, comprising 5 head teachers and 115 household heads. Out of the 120 research

instruments administered, 115 were returned and fully completed, while 5 instruments were not returned. This resulted in an overall response rate of 95.8%, indicating a high level of participation and providing confidence in the reliability and

representativeness of the study findings. The 5 non-returned instruments, accounting for only 4.2%, were considered minimal and unlikely to affect the validity of the results.

Table 1 Response rate

Category	Sample Size	Returned	Not Returned	Response Rate
Head teachers	5	5	0	100%
Household heads	115	110	5	95.7%
Total	120	115	5	95.8%

The impact of Fees Disparities on student enrolment trends in rural private secondary schools.

The third objective of this study was to assess the impact of fees disparities on student enrolment trends in rural private secondary schools in Isingiro South County. To fulfill this objective, the researcher gathered data from students, parents,

and Headteachers using structured questionnaires and interviews. The focus was to establish whether variations in school fees had a direct influence on student enrolment, retention, and transfer patterns between schools. The collected responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: The impact of Fees Disparities on student enrolment trends in rural private secondary schools.

Statement	S.A	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Std Dev
High school fees contribute to inequality in education access.	22 (19.0%)	40 (34.5%)	23 (19.8%)	18 (15.5%)	12 (10.3%)	3.34	1.28
Some students are forced to switch schools frequently due to school fees issues.	34 (29.3%)	47 (40.5%)	6 (5.2%)	16 (13.8%)	12 (10.3%)	3.66	1.25
Schools with lower fees often have overcrowded classrooms.	31 (26.7%)	30 (25.9%)	14 (12.1%)	22 (19.0%)	18 (15.5%)	3.28	1.42
The quality of education in private schools depends on how much fees they charge.	26 (22.4%)	45 (38.8%)	16 (13.8%)	15 (12.9%)	13 (11.2%)	3.48	1.32
Some students perform poorly due to frequent absenteeism caused by unpaid school fees.	49 (42.2%)	30 (25.9%)	16 (13.8%)	11 (9.5%)	9 (7.8%)	3.86	1.25

More students would enroll in rural private secondary schools if fees were reduced.	37 (31.9%)	44 (37.9%)	11 (9.5%)	8 (6.9%)	15 (12.9%)	3.76	1.35
Private schools that increase their fees often lose students to cheaper schools.	42 (36.2%)	34 (29.3%)	12 (10.3%)	17 (14.7%)	10 (8.6%)	3.71	1.33
Parents would prefer private schools if they provided affordable school fees.	45 (38.8%)	44 (37.9%)	9 (7.8%)	10 (8.6%)	7 (6.0%)	3.93	1.23
The government should offer subsidies to private schools to lower fees.	40 (34.5%)	46 (39.7%)	13 (11.2%)	9 (7.8%)	7 (6.0%)	3.87	1.20
The economic status of parents greatly affects private school enrollment trends.	49 (42.2%)	38 (32.8%)	8 (6.9%)	10 (8.6%)	10 (8.6%)	3.94	1.28

Source: Field data 2025

Table 4.5 shows that high school fees contribute to inequality in education access, with a mean score of 3.34 and standard deviation of 1.28. About 53.5% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with this statement, indicating that many students from poor households are unable to afford schools with better facilities and teachers, leaving them disadvantaged compared to peers from wealthier families. One head teacher interviewed emphasized:

“We see many bright students drop out or fail to join our school because their parents cannot raise the fees. This leaves private education only for those who are able to pay, not necessarily for those who are most deserving.”

This aligns with scholars such as Bray (2002), who observed that the commercialization of education in low-income countries leads to unequal access, since families with limited resources cannot compete with wealthier households. Similarly, Lewin (2009) argues that school fees act as a structural barrier to equity in education, especially in rural communities where poverty levels are high. This highlights the role of high fees in creating disparities in educational opportunities. The statement that some students are forced to switch schools frequently due to school fees issues received a higher mean of 3.66 and standard deviation of 1.25. Nearly 70% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. This indicates that financial constraints often compel families to move their children from one school to another,

affecting stability in learning and continuity of education. This instability disrupts learning and lowers academic performance. A head teacher noted: *“Every term we lose a number of students to cheaper schools. Parents keep moving children around whenever they fail to cope with the costs, which destabilizes the students and affects their progress.”* This observation is supported by Nishimura & Yamano (2013), who found that high fees contribute to school mobility among children in sub-Saharan Africa, leading to learning interruptions. Frequent school changes undermine continuity in the learning process, weakening academic achievement and social integration.

Regarding schools with lower fees often having overcrowded classrooms, the mean was 3.28 with a standard deviation of 1.42. Around 52.6% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. This suggests that affordability drives higher enrolment in low-fee schools, which can result in overcrowded classrooms. Overcrowding can compromise the quality of education, as teachers may struggle to attend to all students effectively. To support this, one head teacher stated: *“Our classrooms are too congested because parents rush to us since we charge less. But this also means we struggle with resources and teacher attention.”* This is consistent with UNESCO (2017), which reported that lower-fee schools in rural areas often experience congestion, limiting effective teaching and learning. Over-enrolment due to affordability

pressures compromises the quality of education despite wider access.

On the perception that the quality of education in private schools depends on how much fees they charge, the mean score was 3.48 with a standard deviation of 1.32. Over 61% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, showing that many perceive higher fees as indicative of better educational resources, teaching quality, and learning outcomes. However, this perception may not always align with reality, as some expensive schools may not provide proportionately better education. The study shows that many parents perceive higher fees as a sign of better quality in private schools. Respondents suggested that expensive schools are often associated with well-trained teachers, better facilities, and strong academic outcomes. One head teacher remarked: *"Parents believe that if you pay more, you get better results. That is why some schools raise fees to project quality."*

This agrees with Tooley & Dixon (2006), who observed that in developing countries, the perception of quality is strongly linked to the cost of private schooling. However, as Watkins (2011) cautions, higher fees do not always guarantee quality, since some schools exploit this perception for profit rather than improved learning outcomes. Table 4.5, further shows that some students perform poorly due to frequent absenteeism caused by unpaid school fees, which received the highest mean of 3.86 and a standard deviation of 1.25. About 68% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. This demonstrates that when families cannot pay fees, students miss classes frequently, leading to lower academic performance and potentially higher dropout rates. Majority of respondents agreed that unpaid fees often result in absenteeism, which negatively affects student performance. A head teacher explained: *"Whenever fees are not cleared, some students are chased away, and this leads to absenteeism. By the time they return, they have missed lessons and perform poorly."*

This finding is echoed by Hungi & Thuku (2010), who showed that absenteeism due to financial barriers is a key predictor of poor academic outcomes in East African schools. Similarly, Chimombo (2005) argues that absenteeism linked to fees payment perpetuates inequality by denying

continuous learning opportunities to students from low-income families.

Respondents also agreed that more students would enroll in rural private secondary schools if fees were reduced, with a mean of 3.76 and standard deviation of 1.35. Nearly 70% of respondents expressed agreement. This clearly indicates that affordability is a key driver of enrolment; reducing fees would likely increase the number of students attending private schools in the county. Respondents strongly supported the idea that reducing fees would attract more students to private schools. One head teacher testified: *"Whenever we lower our fees slightly, our enrolment goes up. Parents are very sensitive to costs, and affordability directly influences numbers."*

This is supported by Akyeampong (2009), who argues that reducing the financial burden on parents increases enrolment in both primary and secondary schools. Similarly, UIS (2016) found that affordability is the strongest determinant of private school enrolment trends across sub-Saharan Africa.

The table 4.5 further highlights that private schools that increase their fees often lose students to cheaper schools, with a mean of 3.71 and standard deviation of 1.33. Over 65% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, showing that parents and guardians are highly sensitive to school costs. When fees rise, families tend to transfer their children to schools that are more affordable, reflecting the direct effect of fee disparities on enrolment patterns.

In an interview with head teachers, one head teacher noted: *"We once increased fees and immediately lost over 20 students. Parents simply cannot cope with higher costs, so they take their children elsewhere."* This aligns with Somerville (2017), who observed that in contexts where incomes are unstable, any increase in fees forces families to re-evaluate schooling options. This fee sensitivity highlights the economic vulnerability of parents in rural areas.

Regarding parental preferences, the statement that parents would prefer private schools if they provided affordable school fees received a mean of 3.93 and standard deviation of 1.23, the second-highest in the table. The majority 76.7% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that

affordability would make private schools more attractive. A head teacher explained: *“Parents prefer private schools because of discipline and performance, but the main issue is cost. If fees were lower, enrolment would be much higher.”*

This is confirmed by studies such as Heyneman & Stern (2013), who note that while parents value the quality of private schools, affordability remains the decisive factor influencing school choice. This means private schools could expand access if they reconsidered fee structures.

Similarly, respondents supported the idea that the government should offer subsidies to private schools to lower fees, with a mean of 3.87 and standard deviation of 1.20. Around 74% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. This highlights the public demand for government intervention to make private education more accessible to students from low- and middle-income families.

Finally, the data show that the economic status of parents greatly affects private school enrollment

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Between Fees Disparities and Student Enrolment Trends

t-Moment Correlation was conducted. The results are presented in Table 4.6 below:

Variable	Fees Disparities	Student Enrolment Trends
Fees Disparities	1	-0.179**
Student Enrolment Trends	-0.179**	1
N	115	115

A Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between fees disparities and student enrolment trends in rural private secondary schools in Isingiro South County. The results showed a weak negative correlation of -0.179 with a p-value of 0.621, indicating that as fees disparities increase, student enrollment tends to slightly decrease. However, the relationship was not statistically significant, suggesting that fees disparities alone do not strongly predict enrollment patterns. This finding aligns with qualitative observations from head

trends, which received the highest mean of 3.94 and standard deviation of 1.28. Nearly 75% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. This confirms that students' ability to access and remain in private secondary schools is largely determined by their family's financial capacity. Families with higher income are more able to afford private education, whereas those with limited resources are forced to enroll their children in cheaper schools or withdraw them altogether.

The findings clearly show that fees disparities directly shape student enrolment trends in rural private secondary schools in Isingiro South County. High fees limit access, cause frequent transfers, absenteeism, and poor performance, while lower fees attract students but create overcrowding. Parental economic status is the most decisive factor, and both parents and school heads strongly support fee reductions and government subsidies to ensure affordability. These findings confirm that financial barriers are at the core of enrolment

To quantify the relationship between fees disparities and student enrollment, a Pearson Product

Moment Correlation was conducted using teachers and survey responses, which highlighted that while high fees and additional charges can discourage enrollment, other factors such as parental income, flexible payment plans, provision of scholarships, perceived quality of education, and rural-urban differences also play critical roles in shaping student enrollment trends. Therefore, policies aimed at improving access should consider both affordability and these broader socio-economic factors.

Conclusion

The study reveals that fees disparities in rural private secondary schools significantly affect affordability, enrollment, and perceptions of education quality in Isingiro South County. High fees discourage enrollment, cause delays in fee payment, and lead to student transfers or dropouts. Conversely, schools that adopt moderate and flexible fee structures, along with financial support mechanisms, sustain higher and more stable enrollment. While the statistical correlation between fees disparities and enrollment trends is weak, qualitative evidence and survey data indicate that affordability remains a central factor

in shaping access to private secondary education in rural areas.

Recommendations

Drawing from the study's findings, it is recommended that private schools in Isingiro South County implement more affordable and adaptable fee structures. The research showed that high fees limit enrollment, lead to frequent school transfers, and contribute to absenteeism and lower academic achievement. Setting fees at reasonable levels would help make education accessible to students from low- and middle-income families, without compromising the quality of teaching and learning. Additionally, introducing standardized fee guidelines across private schools could help minimize disparities and promote fair access to education for all learners.

Implementing flexible fee payment options is strongly encouraged. Schools might consider allowing installment plans or deferring payments during times of financial hardship. The study found that late or incomplete payments frequently lead to student absences or transfers, which interrupt learning. By offering more adaptable payment arrangements, schools can help parents handle educational expenses more effectively and support students in staying enrolled and actively engaged in their studies.

Parental awareness and involvement play a crucial role in supporting fee-related policies. Since many parents associate higher fees with better education, this perception often shapes their school selection. To address this, schools should run awareness initiatives to show that lower-cost institutions can offer education on par with more expensive ones. Such efforts can help maintain consistent enrollment, minimize unnecessary school changes, and guide parents to make informed choices based on the quality of education rather than just the price.

It is also advised that local education authorities consistently oversee and review the fee structures of private schools. Creating a clear policy framework to evaluate how fees influence enrollment, student retention, and academic performance would help guide data-driven decisions. This oversight could involve regular

surveys, financial audits, and discussions with parents, students, and school leaders to ensure that fee policies promote fair and inclusive access to education.

Lastly, the study suggests that additional research is needed to understand the long-term consequences of fee disparities in rural private schools. Future investigations might focus on how variations in school fees affect academic outcomes, social development, and gender-based access to education. Moreover, studies could assess the impact of government support and subsidies on increasing enrollment and minimizing inequality, offering valuable insights for shaping policies and improving school administration practices

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