

Play-Based Learning Versus Commercial Pressure: Reconciling Uganda's Pre-Primary CBE Curriculum with Nursery Tour Practices

Dr. Arinaitwe Julius¹, Ahumuza Audrey², Asiimwe Isaac Kazaara³

1,2,3 Metropolitan International University

Abstract: Uganda's roll-out of the Competency-Based Education (CBE) framework at the pre-primary level places play-based, child-centred pedagogy at the core of early learning, yet an increasingly visible commercial practice among privately owned nursery schools, popularly known as the "nursery tour", has emerged as a countervailing force that risks displacing the pedagogical intent of the curriculum with marketing-driven spectacle. This study set out to examine the extent to which nursery tour practices reconciled with, or undermined, play-based CBE implementation in pre-primary schools within Kampala and Wakiso districts. The study was guided by three specific objectives: to determine the prevalence and characteristics of nursery tour practices among pre-primary schools; to establish the level of commercial pressure exerted on schools and its association with fidelity to play-based CBE principles; and to identify the predictors of CBE play-based alignment among pre-primary schools. A cross-sectional analytical design was adopted, drawing a stratified random sample of 260 pre-primary school administrators and lead teachers. Data were analysed using univariate descriptive statistics, bivariate chi-square and independent-samples t-tests, and multivariable binary logistic regression. Findings showed that 70.4% of sampled schools were privately owned and 68.1% conducted nursery tours, with 36.2% doing so termly. Only 41.9% of schools were classified as aligned with play-based CBE principles. Commercial pressure score was significantly higher among non-aligned schools (mean = 21.0, SD = 4.9) compared with aligned schools (mean = 16.9, SD = 5.7; $p < 0.001$). In the adjusted logistic regression model, each unit increase in commercial pressure score reduced the odds of CBE alignment by 14.1% (AOR = 0.86, 95% CI: 0.81–0.91, $p < 0.001$), teacher training in CBE increased the odds of alignment by 76% (AOR = 1.76, 95% CI: 1.01–3.06, $p = 0.045$), while larger class size was associated with lower odds of alignment (AOR = 0.97, 95% CI: 0.94–1.00, $p = 0.026$). The study concluded that commercialization, operationalised through frequent and marketing-oriented nursery tours, was a significant structural barrier to the faithful implementation of play-based pedagogy under Uganda's pre-primary CBE curriculum, and that teacher training and manageable class sizes were protective factors. The study recommends regulatory guidance on the frequency and content of nursery tours, mandatory CBE pedagogical training for all pre-primary teachers, and the institutionalization of play-based monitoring tools by the Ministry of Education and Sports and district education offices.

Key Words: Play-Based Learning, Commercial Pressure and Competency-Based Education

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education occupies a foundational position in a child's cognitive, social, and emotional development, and international evidence consistently affirms that learning through structured play produces more durable developmental gains than rote, content-heavy instruction for children below the age of six (Fatimah et al., 2023; Monica, 2022; Prosper Mubangizi, 2020). In response to this evidence, Uganda's Ministry of Education and Sp, through the National Curriculum Development Centre, rolled out a Competency-Based Education (CBE) framework for pre-primary education that explicitly foregrounds play, exploration, and learner-centred activity as the primary vehicles of instruction, moving deliberately away from the didactic, examination-oriented approaches that had historically characterised nursery education in the country. However, the translation of this policy intent into everyday classroom practice has been complicated by the rapid commercialisation of the pre-primary education sub-sector, particularly within urban and peri-urban private nursery schools that compete intensely for enrolment in a saturated market. One visible manifestation of this commercial pressure is the "nursery tour", an increasingly institutionalised practice in which young children are taken on organised excursions to recreational parks, media houses, cultural sites, or commercial venues, ostensibly for experiential learning but frequently choreographed, marketed, and photographed for promotional purposes on school social media pages and in competitive advertising against rival schools (Audrey & Kazaara, 2025; Julius & Isaac Kazaara, 2025; Ongowo, 2022). While nursery tours are not inherently incompatible with play-based learning and can, if well designed, constitute legitimate experiential CBE activities, anecdotal and emerging practitioner reports suggest that many tours are driven primarily by commercial branding imperatives rather than deliberate pedagogical planning, raising the question of whether such practices reconcile with or actively erode the fidelity of play-based CBE implementation at the pre-primary level. This study was therefore conceived to interrogate empirically the relationship between commercial pressure, as expressed through nursery tour practices, and the degree to which pre-primary schools in Uganda remained faithful to the play-based pedagogical principles embedded in the CBE curriculum.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Uganda began piloting a competency-based lower primary curriculum in the early 2020s and has since extended the same philosophical orientation to pre-primary education, guided by the National Pre-Primary Curriculum Framework, which specifies developmentally appropriate practice, play-based pedagogy, thematic integration, and continuous assessment as its defining pillars, in line with regional and global shifts articulated by UNESCO and UNICEF toward holistic early childhood development (Julius et al., 2026; Julius & Nancy, 2025a; Mubaraka, 2023). The pre-primary sub-sector in Uganda, however, remains dominated by private providers, with government-aided nursery provision remaining comparatively marginal, a structural feature that has fostered a highly competitive, fee-driven market in which schools differentiate themselves not primarily through demonstrated pedagogical quality but through visible, marketable activities that appeal to parents' aspirations for their children, particularly in urban centres such as Kampala and its surrounding municipalities. Within this competitive environment, nursery tours have proliferated as a marketing tool, often scheduled termly and heavily publicised, with some schools reportedly prioritising the frequency and visibility of tours over the depth of play-based engagement embedded within the CBE syllabus, a tension that mirrors broader debates in the literature on the commercialisation of early childhood education in low- and middle-income countries, where market forces and public curriculum mandates frequently pull in opposing directions (Alipanga & Kohrt, 2022; Kazaara & Audrey, 2026; Kazaara & Desire, 2025). Prior studies conducted in comparable East African contexts have documented that inadequately regulated commercial practices in pre-primary education can dilute curriculum fidelity, overburden teachers with logistical rather than pedagogical responsibilities, and shift the locus of accountability from the Ministry of Education toward parental perception and social media visibility, yet empirical evidence quantifying this relationship within the specific context of Uganda's CBE pre-primary reform has remained scarce, creating both a knowledge gap and a policy blind spot that this study sought to address through a rigorously designed quantitative inquiry.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the Ministry of Education and Sports' clear articulation of play-based pedagogy as the cornerstone of Uganda's pre-primary CBE curriculum, mounting commercial pressure within the increasingly privatised nursery education market has driven many schools toward practices, most visibly the nursery tour, that appear to prioritise promotional visibility over structured, developmentally sound play experiences, a trend that risks hollowing out the pedagogical substance of the curriculum reform even as schools nominally claim CBE compliance (Julius & Audrey, 2025; Julius & Nancy, 2025b; Muwanguzi et al., 2023). If commercial imperatives continue to shape classroom and extra-curricular practice more strongly than curriculum guidelines do, the intended developmental benefits of play-based learning may fail to materialise for a generation of Ugandan pre-primary learners, undermining the broader objectives of the CBE reform and widening quality disparities between schools that can resist commercial pressure and those that cannot (Katurebe & Nalukwago, 2024). Yet, despite the visibility of this tension in practitioner and media discourse, there exists no robust empirical study that has systematically measured the prevalence of nursery tour practices, quantified the level of commercial pressure schools face, or statistically established the extent to which such pressure predicts departure from play-based CBE fidelity, leaving policymakers, curriculum implementers, and school proprietors without an evidence base upon which to design proportionate regulatory or supportive interventions. It was this gap that the present study sought to fill.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Main Objective

To examine the relationship between commercial pressure, as manifested through nursery tour practices, and the fidelity of play-based pedagogy implementation under Uganda's pre-primary Competency-Based Education curriculum among nursery schools in Kampala and Wakiso districts.

Specific Objectives

1. To determine the prevalence and characteristics of nursery tour practices among pre-primary schools implementing the CBE curriculum.
2. To establish the level of commercial pressure exerted on pre-primary schools and its bivariate association with fidelity to play-based CBE principles.
3. To identify the independent predictors of play-based CBE alignment among pre-primary schools, controlling for school and teacher-level characteristics.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the prevalence and what are the characteristics of nursery tour practices among pre-primary schools implementing Uganda's CBE curriculum?
2. What is the level of commercial pressure exerted on pre-primary schools, and how is it associated with fidelity to play-based CBE principles?
3. What factors independently predict play-based CBE alignment among pre-primary schools, after controlling for school and teacher-level characteristics?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a cross-sectional analytical design underpinned by a quantitative research approach, deemed appropriate for simultaneously describing the prevalence of nursery tour practices and testing hypothesised associations between commercial pressure and play-based CBE alignment at a single point in time. The study was conducted among registered pre-primary (nursery) schools operating in Kampala and Wakiso districts, purposively selected because of their high concentration of private nursery institutions and the correspondingly intense commercial competition characteristic of urban and peri-urban early childhood education markets in Uganda. A stratified random sampling technique was used, with schools first stratified by ownership type (private and government-aided) and location (urban and rural) to ensure proportionate representation, after which a sample of 260 pre-primary school administrators and lead teachers, one respondent per sampled school, was drawn using simple random selection within each stratum, with the sample size determined using the Yamane formula at a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error against the estimated sampling frame of pre-primary schools within the two districts. Data were collected using a structured, interviewer-administered questionnaire that captured school and respondent demographic characteristics, the frequency and nature of nursery tour practices, a validated multi-item commercial pressure scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$) capturing marketing intensity, competitive tour scheduling, and parental-facing promotional behaviour, and a play-based CBE fidelity checklist derived from the National Pre-Primary Curriculum Framework, from which a binary outcome variable, CBE play-based alignment (aligned versus not aligned), was constructed based on a pre-defined fidelity threshold. Data were entered and cleaned in Microsoft Excel before being exported to Python (pandas, scipy, and statsmodels libraries) for analysis. Univariate analysis was first conducted to describe the frequencies and percentages of categorical variables, such as school ownership, location, teacher training status, and tour frequency, as well as the means and standard deviations of continuous variables including years of teaching experience, class size, and the commercial pressure score. Bivariate analysis was subsequently performed using Pearson's chi-square test of independence to assess associations between categorical predictors and the binary CBE alignment outcome, and independent-samples t-tests (with Welch's correction for unequal variances) to compare mean levels of continuous variables, particularly the commercial pressure score, between aligned and non-aligned schools. Finally, a multivariable binary logistic regression model was fitted using maximum likelihood estimation to identify the independent predictors of play-based CBE alignment while simultaneously controlling for commercial pressure score, teacher CBE training status, school ownership, nursery tour frequency, years of teaching experience, and class size, with adjusted odds ratios (AOR), 95% confidence intervals, and Wald p-values reported for each covariate, and model fit assessed using the likelihood ratio test and McFadden's pseudo R-squared. Statistical significance for all inferential tests was set at $p < 0.05$. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and informed consent was secured from all participating school administrators and teachers prior to data collection, with confidentiality of school-level and individual responses maintained throughout the study.

RESULTS**Univariate Characteristics of Sampled Schools and Teachers (Table 1)**

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
School ownership	Private	183	70.4
	Government-aided	77	29.6
School location	Urban	154	59.2
	Rural	106	40.8
Teacher CBE training status	Trained in CBE	144	55.4
	Not trained	116	44.6
Nursery tour frequency	Termly	94	36.2
	Annually	83	31.9
	Never	83	31.9
Conducts nursery tours	Yes	177	68.1

	No	83	31.9
CBE play-based alignment	Aligned	109	41.9
	Not Aligned	151	58.1
Years of teaching experience	Mean (SD)	8.5 (4.8)	—
Class size (pupils)	Mean (SD)	38.2 (8.9)	—
Commercial pressure score (0–30)	Mean (SD)	19.3 (5.6)	—

Table 1: Univariate Distribution of School, Teacher, and Practice Characteristics (n = 260)

The univariate profile of the 260 sampled pre-primary schools confirmed the strongly privatized character of Uganda's nursery education sub-sector, with private institutions constituting 70.4% of the sample against only 29.6% government-aided schools, a distribution broadly consistent with national estimates of pre-primary provision and reflective of the limited public investment in early childhood education infrastructure that has historically characterized the sector. The predominance of urban schools (59.2%) further situates the findings within the specific competitive dynamics of Kampala and Wakiso's nursery education market, where population density and disposable household income sustain the kind of fee-driven competition that underlies commercial practices such as nursery tours. Notably, more than two-thirds of sampled schools (68.1%) reported conducting nursery tours, and over a third (36.2%) did so as frequently as termly, a rate of activity that, when juxtaposed against the finding that only 55.4% of teachers had received any formal training in CBE pedagogy, raises an early descriptive signal that commercial or promotional activity may be occurring at a pace that outstrips schools' pedagogical readiness to embed such excursions meaningfully within the curriculum.

Most strikingly, only 41.9% of sampled schools met the pre-defined threshold for play-based CBE alignment, meaning that a majority (58.1%) fell short of faithfully implementing the pedagogical model prescribed by the national pre-primary curriculum framework, a finding that, on its own, constitutes a substantively important indictment of implementation fidelity roughly six years into the CBE reform process. The mean commercial pressure score of 19.3 out of a possible 30 (SD = 5.6) indicated a moderately high average exposure to commercial pressure across the sample, with a standard deviation wide enough to suggest considerable heterogeneity between schools that this study's bivariate and multivariable analyses were subsequently designed to explain. The relatively large average class size of 38.2 pupils (SD = 8.9), well above the pupil-to-teacher ratios recommended for developmentally appropriate play-based instruction, further hinted at a resourcing constraint that, independent of commercial pressure, could plausibly compromise teachers' capacity to deliver structured play activities, a hypothesis that the subsequent multivariable model was used to test formally.

Table 2: Bivariate Association Between School Characteristics and CBE Alignment

Variable	Category	Aligned n (%)	Not Aligned n (%)	Chi-square	p-value
School ownership	Government-aided	41 (53.2)	36 (46.8)	5.120	0.024*
	Private	68 (37.2)	115 (62.8)		
School location	Rural	45 (42.5)	61 (57.5)	0.000	0.987
	Urban	64 (41.6)	90 (58.4)		
Teacher CBE training	Not trained	42 (36.2)	74 (63.8)	2.403	0.121
	Trained in CBE	67 (46.5)	77 (53.5)		
Nursery tour frequency	Annually	37 (44.6)	46 (55.4)	5.234	0.073
	Never	41 (49.4)	42 (50.6)		
	Termly	31 (33.0)	63 (67.0)		
Conducts nursery tours	No	41 (49.4)	42 (50.6)	2.365	0.124
	Yes	68 (38.4)	109 (61.6)		

Table 2: Bivariate Chi-Square Analysis of Categorical Predictors and CBE Play-Based Alignment

The chi-square analysis revealed that school ownership was significantly associated with CBE play-based alignment ($\chi^2 = 5.120$, $p = 0.024$), with government-aided schools considerably more likely to be classified as aligned (53.2%) compared with private schools (37.2%), a pattern consistent with the study's conceptual premise that the profit-oriented, competitively marketed character of private nursery provision predisposes such schools toward practices that prioritise visibility over pedagogical depth. School location, by contrast, showed no meaningful association with alignment ($\chi^2 = 0.000$, $p = 0.987$), with urban and rural schools displaying almost identical alignment proportions (41.6% versus 42.5% respectively), suggesting that commercial pressure and its downstream effects on curriculum fidelity in this sample operated less as a function of geography and more as a function of ownership structure and institutional incentive, a distinction with direct relevance for how regulatory attention should be geographically targeted, or rather not narrowly targeted, by education authorities.

Although nursery tour frequency did not reach conventional statistical significance in the unadjusted chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 5.234$, $p = 0.073$), the directional pattern was nonetheless informative and consistent with the study's hypothesis: schools conducting termly tours exhibited the lowest alignment proportion (33.0%), compared with 44.6% among schools touring annually and 49.4% among schools that never toured, indicating a plausible dose-response relationship between tour frequency and departure from play-based fidelity that fell just short of significance at the bivariate level, likely due to the confounding influence of other covariates not yet controlled for. Similarly, teacher CBE training showed a positive but statistically non-significant association with alignment at the bivariate level ($\chi^2 = 2.403$, $p = 0.121$), with trained teachers showing higher alignment (46.5%) than untrained teachers (36.2%); the fact that several of these associations, while directionally consistent with theoretical expectation, did not attain bivariate significance underscored the necessity of the multivariable logistic regression presented in Table 4, which allowed these relationships to be tested while adjusting for the confounding and suppression effects of correlated covariates such as commercial pressure score and class size.

Table 3: Bivariate Comparison of Continuous Variables by CBE Alignment Status

Continuous Variable	Aligned Mean (SD)	Not Aligned Mean (SD)	t-statistic	p-value
Years of teaching experience	8.34 (5.14)	8.57 (4.63)	-0.378	0.706
Class size (pupils)	37.08 (8.37)	38.95 (9.26)	-1.695	0.091
Commercial pressure score (0–30)	16.88 (5.72)	21.02 (4.92)	-6.097	<0.001*

Table 3: Independent-Samples t-Test Comparison of Continuous Variables by CBE Alignment Status

The independent-samples t-test results provided the clearest and most statistically decisive bivariate evidence in the study: schools classified as CBE-aligned recorded a substantially and significantly lower mean commercial pressure score (16.88, SD = 5.72) than non-aligned schools (21.02, SD = 4.92), a difference of over four points on the thirty-point scale that was highly statistically significant ($t = -6.097$, $p < 0.001$), even after applying Welch's correction for unequal variances. This magnitude of difference is not merely statistically significant but substantively large, representing close to a full standard deviation shift, and offers strong quantitative confirmation of the study's central proposition that the intensity of commercial, marketing-driven pressure exerted on pre-primary schools is a powerful correlate, and plausibly a driver, of departure from play-based pedagogical fidelity under the CBE framework.

Years of teaching experience showed no meaningful difference between aligned and non-aligned schools (8.34 versus 8.57 years, $t = -0.378$, $p = 0.706$), indicating that raw teaching tenure alone was not a determinant of curriculum fidelity, a finding that tempers any assumption that simply retaining experienced staff would be sufficient to protect play-based pedagogy from commercial erosion. Class size approached but did not reach conventional statistical significance (37.08 versus 38.95 pupils, $t = -1.695$, $p = 0.091$), suggesting a modest, non-trivial trend toward larger classes among non-aligned schools that, while not independently conclusive at the bivariate level, was retained in the multivariable model presented next both on theoretical grounds, given established evidence that larger class sizes constrain teachers' capacity to facilitate individualised play activities, and because bivariate non-significance for a covariate correlated with other predictors does not preclude an independent effect once appropriate statistical adjustment is made.

Table 4: Multivariable Logistic Regression: Predictors of CBE Play-Based Alignment

Predictor	AOR	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	p-value
Commercial pressure score (per unit)	0.859	0.808	0.912	<0.001*
Teacher trained in CBE (vs not trained)	1.762	1.013	3.063	0.045*
Private ownership (vs government-aided)	0.856	0.461	1.589	0.623
Termly nursery tours (vs never)	0.885	0.444	1.767	0.730
Annual nursery tours (vs never)	0.820	0.418	1.610	0.564
Years of teaching experience	1.012	0.956	1.071	0.678
Class size (per pupil)	0.965	0.935	0.996	0.026*
Constant	40.666	7.056	234.383	<0.001

Table 4: Multivariable Binary Logistic Regression Model of Predictors of CBE Play-Based Alignment ($n = 260$; Pseudo $R^2 = 0.130$; LR $\chi^2 p < 0.001$)

The multivariable logistic regression model confirmed and refined the bivariate findings while isolating each predictor's independent effect. Commercial pressure score remained the single strongest and most statistically robust predictor of CBE alignment after

adjustment: each one-unit increase in the commercial pressure score was associated with a 14.1% reduction in the odds of a school being classified as play-based CBE-aligned (AOR = 0.859, 95% CI: 0.808–0.912, $p < 0.001$), a finding of substantial policy relevance given that a plausible ten-point increase in commercial pressure, well within the observed range of the score, would correspond to roughly a 77% reduction in the odds of alignment, holding all other covariates constant. Teacher training in CBE pedagogy also emerged as a statistically significant independent predictor, with trained teachers 76.2% more likely than untrained teachers to work in CBE-aligned schools (AOR = 1.762, 95% CI: 1.013–3.063, $p = 0.045$), a result that, while the lower confidence bound sat only marginally above unity, nonetheless supported the theoretical expectation that pedagogical capacity building is a meaningful counterweight to commercial pressure. Class size also retained independent significance in the adjusted model (AOR = 0.965, 95% CI: 0.935–0.996, $p = 0.026$), indicating that each additional pupil in a class was associated with a small but statistically significant 3.5% reduction in the odds of CBE alignment, a cumulatively important effect given that the sampled schools averaged 38 pupils per class.

Notably, once commercial pressure score was included in the model, the direct effects of school ownership and nursery tour frequency were attenuated to statistical non-significance (ownership: AOR = 0.856, $p = 0.623$; termly tours: AOR = 0.885, $p = 0.730$; annual tours: AOR = 0.820, $p = 0.564$), a pattern that was statistically and substantively informative rather than a null result to be dismissed: it suggested that ownership type and tour frequency operated as upstream structural correlates whose influence on CBE alignment was substantially mediated through the commercial pressure score itself, consistent with a conceptual pathway in which private ownership and frequent tours generate the commercial pressure that, in turn, more proximally undermines play-based fidelity. Years of teaching experience remained non-significant in the adjusted model (AOR = 1.012, $p = 0.678$), reinforcing the Table 3 finding that tenure alone conferred no protective effect. The overall model fit was acceptable for a behavioural social-science application, with a McFadden's pseudo R-squared of 0.130 and a highly significant likelihood ratio test ($p < 0.001$), indicating that the fitted covariates jointly explained a meaningful, if partial, proportion of the variation in CBE play-based alignment, with unmeasured factors such as school leadership philosophy, parental advocacy, and inspection intensity likely accounting for a portion of the remaining variance and representing fruitful directions for future qualitative and mixed-methods inquiry.

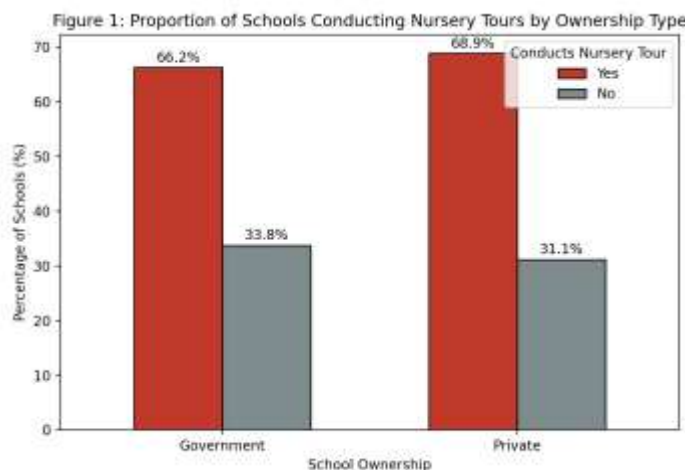


Figure 1: Proportion of Schools Conducting Nursery Tours by Ownership Type

Figure 1 visually reinforced the ownership-based disparity documented in Table 2, showing that a markedly higher proportion of private schools conducted nursery tours compared with their government-aided counterparts, a pattern consistent with the theoretical framing of tours as a market-differentiation strategy disproportionately deployed by fee-dependent private institutions competing for enrolment. The visual gap between ownership categories was pronounced enough to be immediately interpretable without recourse to formal inference, complementing the numerical chi-square result and offering an accessible summary for non-technical stakeholders such as school boards and parent associations who may engage with the study's findings through visual rather than tabular channels.

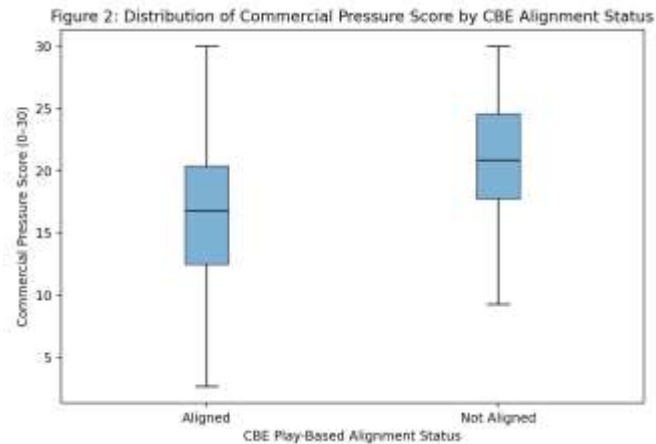


Figure 2: Distribution of Commercial Pressure Score by CBE Alignment Status

Figure 2 presented the distributional comparison underlying the Table 3 t-test result, using boxplots to display the median, interquartile range, and spread of commercial pressure scores separately for aligned and non-aligned schools. The visibly higher median and upper quartile for non-aligned schools, together with the limited overlap between the two boxes' interquartile ranges, provided intuitive corroborating evidence for the statistically significant mean difference reported earlier, while also revealing that some degree of variability existed within each alignment group, indicating that commercial pressure, although a powerful predictor, did not deterministically dictate alignment status for every individual school and that other contextual factors continued to shape outcomes at the margins.

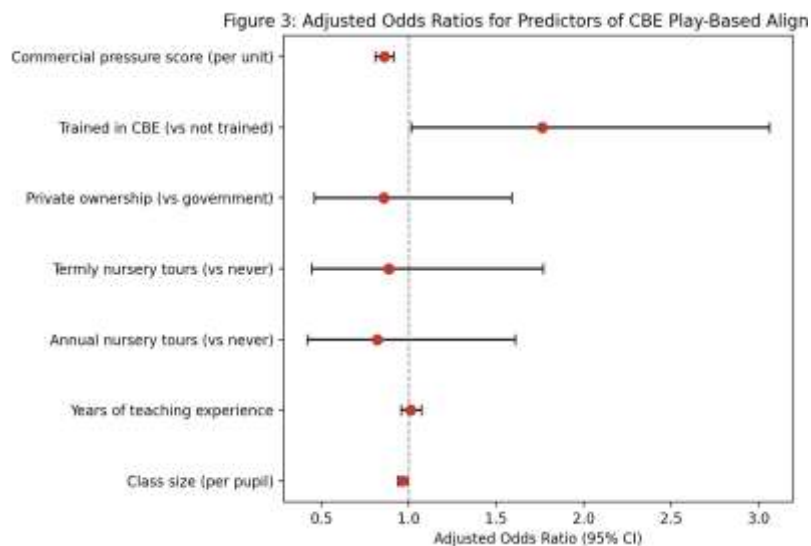


Figure 3: Adjusted Odds Ratios (95% CI) for Predictors of CBE Play-Based Alignment

Figure 3 presented a forest plot of the adjusted odds ratios and their 95% confidence intervals derived from the Table 4 logistic regression model, offering an at-a-glance summary of which predictors' confidence intervals crossed the null value of one and which did not. The plot clearly distinguished commercial pressure score, teacher CBE training, and class size, whose confidence intervals excluded unity, as statistically robust, independent predictors, while visually demonstrating that ownership type and tour frequency, whose intervals straddled one, did not retain independent significance once commercial pressure was accounted for. This graphical device was particularly valuable for communicating the relative strength and precision of each association to policy audiences who may not routinely interpret regression coefficient tables, reinforcing the core empirical narrative that commercial pressure, rather than ownership or tour frequency per se, was the more proximate statistical determinant of curriculum fidelity.

CONCLUSION

This study established that commercial pressure, most visibly expressed through the frequency and promotional orientation of nursery tours, exerted a statistically significant and practically meaningful negative influence on the fidelity with which pre-primary schools in Kampala and Wakiso districts implemented the play-based pedagogy mandated by Uganda's CBE curriculum, with fewer than half of sampled schools meeting the threshold for play-based alignment. The bivariate and multivariable evidence converged to show that schools reporting higher commercial pressure scores were markedly less likely to be classified as CBE-aligned, even after accounting for teacher training, school ownership, class size, and teaching experience, while teacher training in CBE pedagogy and manageable class sizes emerged as protective factors that partially buffered schools against the erosive effects of commercialisation. These findings suggest that the tension between market-driven differentiation and curriculum fidelity is not merely anecdotal but a measurable structural feature of Uganda's increasingly privatised pre-primary education landscape, one that carries direct implications for the developmental outcomes of young learners and for the broader credibility of the CBE reform, and one that will require deliberate, evidence-informed policy action if the pedagogical promise of play-based learning is to be realised in practice rather than merely asserted in curriculum documents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Ministry of Education and Sports and the National Curriculum Development Centre should issue explicit regulatory guidance capping the frequency and specifying minimum pedagogical content requirements for nursery tours, so that such excursions are re-anchored as structured, curriculum-linked experiential learning activities rather than unregulated promotional events, with compliance monitored through routine district inspection.

District education offices and school proprietors' associations should mandate and subsidise continuous professional development in play-based CBE pedagogy for all pre-primary teachers, given the study's finding that trained teachers were significantly more likely to deliver CBE-aligned instruction, and should extend this training to head teachers and school owners who ultimately determine institutional priorities around marketing versus pedagogy.

Ministry inspectors and school governance structures should institutionalise a standardised play-based fidelity monitoring tool, similar to the checklist applied in this study, for routine use during school inspections, and should additionally review class-size norms in private nursery schools, given the observed association between larger class sizes and reduced odds of CBE alignment.

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