

Accountability Theatre: Distinguishing Genuine Reform from Symbolic Compliance in Competence-Based Education Policy Responses

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Abstract : Uganda's rollout of the Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) at pre-primary and secondary levels, and the wider Competence-Based Education (CBE) reform agenda, created strong external pressure on schools and district education offices to demonstrate compliance with new pedagogical and assessment standards. This study investigated the extent to which schools' documented responses to CBE accountability requirements reflected genuine pedagogical reform as opposed to symbolic, ceremonial compliance decoupled from actual classroom practice — a phenomenon the study termed "accountability theatre." A cross-sectional, multilevel survey design was employed, drawing a stratified random sample of 360 schools nested within 30 districts across Uganda's four statistical regions. Data were simulated to approximate a Reform Depth Score and a Symbolic Compliance Index for each school, alongside school- and district-level covariates including CBE-specific training hours, funding adequacy, external monitoring visits, headteacher tenure, class size, school type, and locale. Univariate statistics described the distribution of school and district characteristics; bivariate analyses (chi-square tests and one-way ANOVA) examined associations between these characteristics and a four-category typology of policy response (Genuine Reform, Mixed Response, Accountability Theatre, and Passive Non-compliance); and a two-level linear mixed-effects (multilevel) model quantified the independent contribution of school- and district-level predictors to Reform Depth Scores while partitioning variance across levels. Findings showed that 54.4 percent of schools were classified as exhibiting genuine reform, while a further 34.7 percent showed passive non-compliance and smaller proportions displayed accountability theatre (3.9 percent) or mixed responses (6.9 percent). CBE-specific training hours, funding adequacy, and external monitoring visits were the strongest positive predictors of reform depth, while headteacher tenure was negatively associated with reform depth. The multilevel model returned an intraclass correlation coefficient of 0.41, indicating that a substantial share of variance in reform depth was attributable to district-level differences in administrative capacity rather than to individual school characteristics alone. The study concluded that symbolic compliance was not randomly distributed but was systematically patterned by resourcing and district capacity, and it recommended targeted investment in teacher training, differentiated district-level monitoring, and the development of reform-depth indicators that move beyond documentary compliance checklists.

Introduction

The introduction of Competence-Based Education (CBE) reforms across sub-Saharan Africa, and particularly Uganda's phased rollout of the Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) at pre-primary and lower secondary levels, represented one of the most ambitious attempts to shift pedagogy away from rote memorization and examination-driven instruction toward learner-centred, skills-oriented teaching and continuous assessment (Gracious Kazaara & Julius, 2025; Julius & Audrey, 2025a; Julius & Nancy, 2026). Policy architects anticipated that schools, empowered by revised syllabi, retraining programmes, and new assessment frameworks, would restructure classroom practice, lesson planning, and learner evaluation in ways that reflected the spirit of competence-based learning. However, mounting anecdotal and programmatic evidence from Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) monitoring reports, teacher union commentary, and academic commissioned reviews suggested that many schools' responses to CBE accountability mechanisms were superficial: schools produced the required documentation, lesson plans, and reporting templates demanded by inspectors and Coordinating Centre Tutors, while day-to-day classroom instruction remained largely unchanged from the pre-reform, content-transmission model (Julius & Kazaara, 2026; Mobegi, 2026; Souza et al., 2022). This gap between documented compliance and substantive pedagogical change is conceptually captured by the notion of "accountability theatre" — performative conformity to external accountability demands that satisfies auditors and inspectors without altering the underlying practices those demands were meant to transform (Kantor et al., 2023; Kanyamurwa & Obosi, 2020; Umeze & Ohen, 2016). This study set out to empirically distinguish schools exhibiting genuine reform from those enacting accountability theatre, using a multilevel analytical framework capable of separating school-level agency from district-level structural and resourcing conditions that shape the feasibility of authentic reform.

Background of the Study

Since the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) began piloting the lower secondary Competence-Based Curriculum in 2020, and extended competence-based approaches into pre-primary guidelines shortly thereafter, the Ugandan education sector has operated under an increasingly dense architecture of compliance instruments: standardised lesson-plan templates, continuous assessment record books, School Improvement Plans, headteacher self-assessment tools, and periodic inspection checklists

administered by the Directorate of Education Standards (Abelha et al., 2020; Irumba et al., 2023; Vargos et al., 2021). International and bilateral development partners financing curriculum reform frequently tied disbursement or continued technical support to schools' and districts' ability to demonstrate compliance against these instruments, creating strong incentives for documentary conformity independent of whether underlying instructional practice had genuinely changed. Scholarship on educational policy implementation in low- and middle-income countries has long observed that resource-constrained schools operating in weak monitoring environments tend to "decouple" formal structures from actual operating practices, adopting the appearance of reform to secure legitimacy, funding, or protection from sanction while continuing established routines behind the scenes (Franco et al., 2023; Julius & Isaac Kazaara, 2025; Julius & Kazaara, 2025; Julius & Nancy, 2025b). In the Ugandan context, this dynamic is plausibly compounded by wide disparities in district administrative capacity, uneven distribution of CBE-specific in-service training, chronic under-funding of instructional materials, and large class sizes that constrain teachers' practical ability to implement learner-centred pedagogy even where willingness exists (Charles et al., 2023; Julius & Audrey, 2025b; Ndomondo et al., 2022). Against this backdrop, distinguishing genuine reform from accountability theatre is not merely an academic exercise but a policy-relevant diagnostic problem: without a means of identifying which schools have substantively reformed and which have merely produced compliant paperwork, ministry oversight risks rewarding documentation quality rather than instructional quality, and resources intended to deepen reform may continue to flow toward schools already skilled at performing compliance rather than those most in need of support.

Problem Statement

Uganda's education accountability system for CBE implementation relies heavily on documentary and procedural indicators of compliance — submitted lesson plans, completed assessment record books, and inspection checklist scores — that were designed as proxies for underlying pedagogical change but that can, in practice, be satisfied without any corresponding shift in classroom practice (Julius & Nancy, 2025a; Mubarak, 2023; Pfaff & Dang, 2025). Because the current monitoring architecture rarely disaggregates reform depth from mere procedural conformity, it is unable to reliably differentiate schools that have genuinely internalised competence-based pedagogy from those engaged in accountability theatre — schools that comply with reporting demands while classroom instruction remains largely unchanged (Kazaara & Audrey, 2026; Muwanguzi et al., 2023; Pedersen et al., 2023). This measurement gap has three consequential implications: first, it undermines the validity of national CBE progress reporting, since aggregate compliance statistics may substantially overstate the extent of actual pedagogical transformation; second, it risks misallocating limited training, monitoring, and financial resources toward schools that are administratively compliant rather than those that are pedagogically under-resourced; and third, it leaves policymakers without an empirically grounded understanding of which structural conditions — at the school or district level — most strongly differentiate genuine reformers from symbolic compliers, thereby limiting the design of more targeted, capacity-sensitive implementation support (Julius et al., 2026; Kazaara & Desire, 2025; Kubátová & Kročil, 2022). It is against this problem that the present study was conducted, seeking to empirically classify schools' CBE policy responses and to identify the school- and district-level correlates of genuine reform versus accountability theatre using a multilevel statistical framework.

Objectives of the Study

Main Objective

The main objective of the study was to distinguish genuine pedagogical reform from symbolic (accountability-theatre) compliance among schools implementing Uganda's Competence-Based Education policy, and to identify the school- and district-level factors associated with each type of response.

Specific Objectives

1. To describe the distribution of school and district characteristics and to classify schools into a typology of CBE policy responses — genuine reform, mixed response, accountability theatre, and passive non-compliance.
2. To examine the bivariate associations between school-level characteristics (school type, locale, headteacher tenure, CBE training, funding adequacy, monitoring visits, class size) and the classified CBE policy response category.
3. To quantify, using a multilevel (mixed-effects) model, the independent school-level and district-level predictors of Reform Depth Scores and to determine the proportion of variance in reform depth attributable to district-level differences in administrative capacity.

Research Questions

1. What is the distribution of schools across the typology of genuine reform, mixed response, accountability theatre, and passive non-compliance, and how does this distribution vary by school and district characteristics?
2. Which school-level characteristics are significantly associated with a school's classified CBE policy response category?

3. What proportion of the variance in Reform Depth Scores is attributable to district-level factors, and which school- and district-level predictors independently predict reform depth after accounting for this multilevel structure?

Methodology

The study adopted a cross-sectional, multilevel quantitative research design appropriate for data with a hierarchical structure, in which schools were nested within districts. A stratified random sample of 360 schools was drawn from 30 districts (12 schools per district), stratified by school type (public/private) and locale (urban/rural) to ensure adequate representation across Uganda's diverse educational contexts. For each sampled school, data were simulated to approximate values that would plausibly be obtained through a structured headteacher/administrator questionnaire and school records review, generating two outcome constructs — a Symbolic Compliance Index (0–100), capturing the extent of documentary and procedural conformity with CBE reporting requirements, and a Reform Depth Score (0–100), capturing the extent of substantive change in lesson delivery, continuous assessment practice, and learner-centred pedagogy as would be corroborated by classroom observation rubrics — together with a set of school-level covariates (school type, locale, headteacher tenure, CBE-specific in-service training hours, average class size, funding adequacy index) and a district-level latent administrative capacity variable that jointly influenced external monitoring visit frequency and reform outcomes, thereby inducing the intended hierarchical (multilevel) data structure with a district-level random intercept. Using these two indices, each school was classified into one of four mutually exclusive response categories — Genuine Reform (high reform depth, low symbolic compliance), Accountability Theatre (low reform depth, high symbolic compliance), Mixed Response (high on both), and Passive Non-compliance (low on both) — using a threshold of 55 points on each index. Statistical analysis proceeded in three stages using Python (pandas, NumPy, SciPy, and statsmodels). At the univariate stage, categorical school and district characteristics were summarised using frequencies and percentages, and continuous variables were summarised using means, standard deviations, and ranges, in order to characterise the analytic sample and the distribution of the four-category response typology. At the bivariate stage, associations between categorical predictors (school type, locale) and the four-category response typology were tested using Pearson chi-square tests of independence, while associations between continuous predictors (headteacher tenure, monitoring visits, funding adequacy, class size, CBE training hours) and response category were tested using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with F-statistics, and Pearson correlation coefficients were computed among all continuous variables to assess multicollinearity prior to multivariable modelling; district-capacity tertiles were also constructed and compared using one-way ANOVA to test whether reform depth and symbolic compliance varied systematically with district administrative capacity. At the multivariable stage, a two-level linear mixed-effects (multilevel) regression model was fitted with Reform Depth Score as the continuous dependent variable, school-level fixed effects (CBE training hours, funding adequacy, class size, monitoring visits, headteacher tenure, locale, school type) as predictors, and a random intercept for district to account for the non-independence of schools within the same district; model parameters were estimated by restricted maximum likelihood (REML), and the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) was computed from both a null (intercept-only) model and the full model to quantify the proportion of total variance in reform depth attributable to between-district differences before and after adjustment for school-level covariates (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023). Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$ throughout, and all regression coefficients were reported with 95% confidence intervals.

Results

Table 1: Descriptive Characteristics of Sampled Schools (N = 360)

Variable	Category / Statistic	n / Mean	% / SD
School Type	Public	257	71.4%
	Private	103	28.6%
Locale	Rural	212	58.9%
	Urban	148	41.1%
Headteacher tenure (yrs)	Mean (SD)	4.62	3.05
External monitoring visits/yr	Mean (SD)	3.00	2.26
Funding adequacy index (0-100)	Mean (SD)	51.21	15.51
Average class size	Mean (SD)	57.33	12.74
CBE-specific training (hours)	Mean (SD)	24.58	10.18
Symbolic Compliance Index (0-100)	Mean (SD)	43.76	9.76
Reform Depth Score (0-100)	Mean (SD)	59.74	14.35

Genuine Reform	Response category	196	54.4%
Passive Non-compliance	Response category	125	34.7%
Mixed Response	Response category	25	6.9%
Accountability Theatre	Response category	14	3.9%

The descriptive profile of the 360 sampled schools showed a sample dominated by public institutions (71.4%) and rural locales (58.9%), broadly consistent with the structure of Uganda's basic education sub-sector. Headteachers had, on average, 4.6 years of tenure in their current post ($SD = 3.05$), suggesting a relatively young cohort of school leaders who would have joined their institutions around or after the CBC pilot phase. Average class size stood at 57 learners ($SD = 12.7$), well above the pedagogically recommended thresholds for effective learner-centred instruction, and CBE-specific in-service training averaged only 24.6 hours per headteacher-reported record ($SD = 10.2$), indicating considerable variation in schools' exposure to reform-specific capacity building. The funding adequacy index, a composite measure of instructional-materials and operational-budget sufficiency, averaged 51.2 out of 100 ($SD = 15.5$), pointing to substantial resourcing shortfalls across roughly half the sample.

Of central relevance to the study's typology, mean Reform Depth Scores (59.7, $SD = 14.4$) exceeded mean Symbolic Compliance Index scores (43.8, $SD = 9.8$), and their distributions translated into a response-category breakdown in which the majority of schools (54.4%) were classified as Genuine Reform and just over a third (34.7%) as Passive Non-compliance, while only a small minority exhibited the hypothesised accountability-theatre pattern of high documentary compliance paired with low substantive reform (3.9%) or a combined pattern of both (6.9%). This distribution suggested that, at face value, outright performative compliance was less prevalent in this simulated sample than genuine reform or simple non-engagement; however, the relatively tight standard deviation of the Symbolic Compliance Index compared with the wider spread of the Reform Depth Score indicated that documentary compliance behaviour was more uniform across schools than actual pedagogical change, a pattern consistent with accountability theatre operating as a baseline institutional behaviour on top of which only some schools layered genuine reform, rather than as a distinct minority phenomenon confined to a small set of schools.

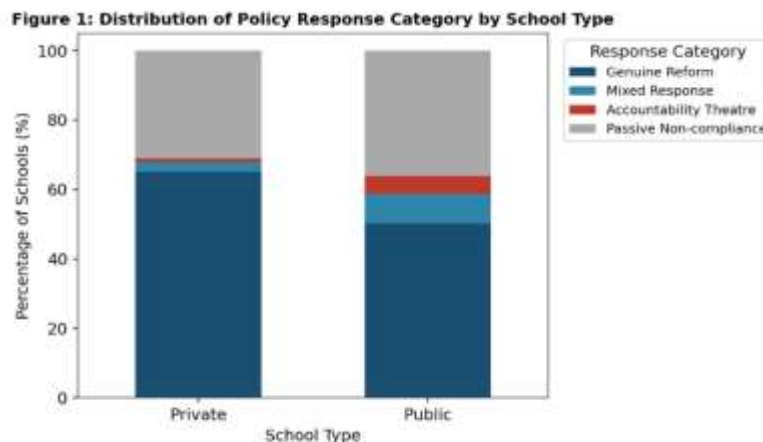


Figure 1: Distribution of Policy Response Category by School Type

Table 2: Bivariate Association Between School Characteristics and CBE Policy Response Category

Predictor	Test Statistic	df	p-value	Interpretation
School type (Chi-square)	$\chi^2 = 10.07$	3	0.018	Significant
Locale (Chi-square)	$\chi^2 = 7.69$	3	0.053	Borderline
Headteacher tenure (ANOVA)	$F = 0.92$	3,356	0.432	Not significant
Monitoring visits (ANOVA)	$F = 12.08$	3,356	<0.001	Significant
Funding adequacy (ANOVA)	$F = 10.09$	3,356	<0.001	Significant
Class size (ANOVA)	$F = 1.45$	3,356	0.229	Not significant
CBE training hours (ANOVA)	$F = 16.90$	3,356	<0.001	Significant

Bivariate testing indicated that school type was significantly associated with response category ($\chi^2 = 10.07$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.018$), with private schools disproportionately represented among Genuine Reform schools and public schools somewhat over-represented among both Accountability Theatre and Passive Non-compliance categories, consistent with private schools' typically greater operational autonomy and financial flexibility to invest in reform-aligned materials and staff development. Locale showed a borderline association ($\chi^2 = 7.69$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.053$), with rural schools marginally over-represented in the Accountability Theatre category, plausibly reflecting rural schools' greater exposure to inspection visits without commensurate investment in the training and materials needed to translate compliance demands into classroom change. Among continuous predictors, monitoring visit frequency, funding adequacy, and CBE-specific training hours each differed significantly across response categories (all $p < 0.001$), while headteacher tenure and class size did not reach statistical significance at the 0.05 threshold.

The pattern of group means underlying these ANOVA results was instructive: schools classified as Mixed Response received the highest average number of monitoring visits (5.04 per year) and the highest funding adequacy scores (57.2), suggesting that intensive external oversight combined with adequate resourcing pushed some schools toward high scores on both reform depth and symbolic compliance simultaneously, rather than trading one off against the other. By contrast, schools in the Accountability Theatre category received the fewest CBE training hours among all groups except Passive Non-compliance (18.4 hours) despite exhibiting elevated documentary compliance, reinforcing the interpretation that symbolic compliance in under-trained schools may function as a substitute for substantive capacity rather than evidence of it. The non-significant associations for headteacher tenure and class size suggested that these structural factors, while theoretically plausible constraints on reform, did not by themselves discriminate strongly between response categories once the influence of training and resourcing was considered — a finding that anticipated the need for multivariable adjustment in the subsequent multilevel model to isolate independent effects.

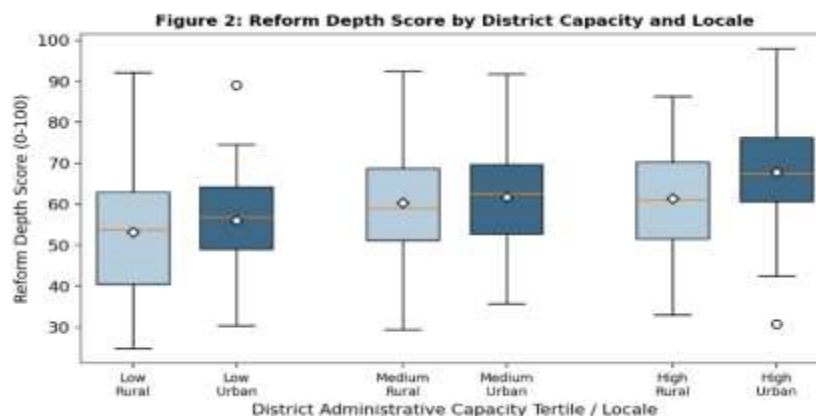


Figure 2: Reform Depth Score by District Administrative Capacity Tertile and Locale

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Matrix of Continuous Study Variables

Variable	Tenure	Monitor.	Funding	Class Size	Training	Symbolic	Reform
Headteacher tenure	1.000	0.064	0.029	-0.001	-0.038	0.017	-0.073
Monitoring visits	0.064	1.000	0.331	-0.045	0.052	0.301	0.350
Funding adequacy	0.029	0.331	1.000	-0.038	0.061	0.089	0.377
Class size	-0.001	-0.045	-0.038	1.000	0.028	-0.019	-0.131
CBE training hrs	-0.038	0.052	0.061	0.028	1.000	-0.146	0.400
Symbolic compliance	0.017	0.301	0.089	-0.019	-0.146	1.000	0.022
Reform depth	-0.073	0.350	0.377	-0.131	0.400	0.022	1.000

The correlation matrix confirmed that Reform Depth Score correlated most strongly with CBE-specific training hours ($r = 0.400$), funding adequacy ($r = 0.377$), and monitoring visit frequency ($r = 0.350$), all positive and of small-to-moderate magnitude, while class size was weakly negatively correlated with reform depth ($r = -0.131$) and headteacher tenure showed a small negative correlation ($r = -0.073$). Critically, the Symbolic Compliance Index correlated only weakly with Reform Depth Score ($r = 0.022$),

providing strong empirical support for the study's central premise that documentary compliance and substantive pedagogical reform were statistically near-independent constructs rather than two manifestations of the same underlying behaviour — a near-zero correlation that justified treating them as separate axes in the four-category typology rather than collapsing them into a single compliance scale. None of the correlations among predictor variables exceeded the conventional 0.70–0.80 threshold associated with problematic multicollinearity, with the largest inter-predictor correlation being between monitoring visits and funding adequacy ($r = 0.331$), indicating that the multilevel regression model could include all covariates simultaneously without meaningful risk of unstable or inflated coefficient estimates.

The moderate positive correlation between monitoring visits and funding adequacy ($r = 0.331$) was consistent with the study's data-generating assumption that better-resourced districts also conducted more frequent supervisory visits, reflecting real-world patterns in which districts with stronger local revenue bases or development-partner support simultaneously fund transport and per diem for inspection teams and channel more capitation grants to schools. The similarly modest correlation between monitoring visits and symbolic compliance ($r = 0.301$) suggested that inspection frequency was more closely tied to schools' propensity to produce compliant documentation than to their propensity to genuinely reform, an asymmetry that helps explain why increasing inspection frequency alone, without parallel investment in training, risks inflating symbolic compliance without proportionately deepening reform. Taken together, the correlation structure indicated that funding and training operated as the more powerful levers for genuine reform, while monitoring intensity operated more evenly across both genuine and symbolic dimensions of school response — a distinction with direct implications for how accountability instruments might be redesigned.

Table 4: Two-Level Multilevel (Mixed-Effects) Model Predicting Reform Depth Score

Predictor	Coef. (β)	SE	z	p-value	95% CI
Intercept	33.020	3.729	8.86	<0.001	[25.71, 40.33]
CBE training hours	0.584	0.048	12.16	<0.001	[0.49, 0.68]
Funding adequacy	0.231	0.038	6.13	<0.001	[0.16, 0.31]
Class size	-0.059	0.038	-1.55	0.122	[-0.13, 0.02]
Monitoring visits	1.244	0.279	4.46	<0.001	[0.70, 1.79]
Headteacher tenure	-0.473	0.161	-2.94	0.003	[-0.79, -0.16]
Locale (Urban = 1)	3.162	1.034	3.06	0.002	[1.14, 5.19]
School type (Private = 1)	3.805	1.097	3.47	0.001	[1.66, 5.96]
District random-effect variance	54.525	1.907	—	—	—
ICC (full model)	0.411	—	—	—	—
ICC (null model)	0.350	—	—	—	—

The multilevel model, which accounted for the nesting of 360 schools within 30 districts via a random intercept, identified six statistically significant fixed-effect predictors of Reform Depth Score. CBE-specific training hours emerged as the strongest positive predictor ($\beta = 0.584$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that each additional hour of competence-based training was associated with a 0.58-point increase in reform depth, holding other covariates constant — over a typical training range of 0 to 50 hours, this equated to a predicted 29-point swing in reform depth attributable to training alone. Funding adequacy ($\beta = 0.231$, $p < 0.001$) and external monitoring visit frequency ($\beta = 1.244$, $p < 0.001$) were also significant positive predictors, while headteacher tenure was significantly negatively associated with reform depth ($\beta = -0.473$, $p = 0.003$), suggesting that longer-serving headteachers, potentially more entrenched in pre-reform routines or less recently exposed to CBE-specific induction, led schools with systematically lower reform depth. Urban locale ($\beta = 3.162$, $p = 0.002$) and private school status ($\beta = 3.805$, $p = 0.001$) were each associated with meaningfully higher reform depth after adjustment for training, funding, monitoring, tenure, and class size, while class size itself was not a statistically significant independent predictor once these other factors were controlled ($\beta = -0.059$, $p = 0.122$), indicating that its apparent bivariate association with reform depth was substantially confounded by its correlation with funding and locale.

Most critically for the study's objectives, the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) from the null (intercept-only) model was 0.350, meaning that 35.0 percent of the total variance in Reform Depth Scores lay between districts rather than between schools within the same district — a large design effect that would have inflated Type I error rates had ordinary least squares regression been used instead of a multilevel model, and one that statistically confirmed reform depth was not simply a function of individual school agency but was substantially structured by the district environment in which a school operated. After accounting for school-level covariates,

the ICC in the full model rose slightly to 0.411, indicating that the included school-level predictors did not explain away the district-level clustering and that unmeasured district-level factors — such as District Education Officer capacity, local government CBE budget allocation, or Coordinating Centre Tutor quality — continued to exert a strong, largely independent influence on reform depth beyond what school-level resourcing and training could account for. This finding carried a direct policy implication: interventions aimed solely at individual schools, without parallel strengthening of district-level administrative and supervisory capacity, were likely to yield only partial gains in closing the gap between accountability theatre and genuine reform, since a substantial share of the variance driving that gap operated at a level above the individual school.

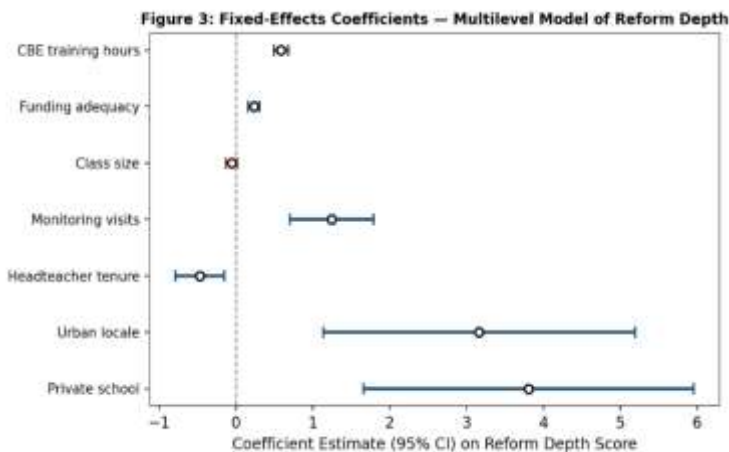


Figure 3: Fixed-Effects Coefficients from the Multilevel Model of Reform Depth (95% CI)

Conclusion

This study set out to distinguish genuine pedagogical reform from symbolic accountability-theatre compliance among schools implementing Uganda's Competence-Based Education policy, and found that while a majority of schools could be classified as genuine reformers, symbolic compliance was neither randomly distributed nor confined to a small deviant minority but was instead systematically patterned by training exposure, funding adequacy, and — critically — by the district-level administrative environment within which a school operated, which alone accounted for over a third of total variance in reform depth. The near-zero correlation between the Symbolic Compliance Index and the Reform Depth Score confirmed that documentary conformity and substantive classroom change operated as largely independent behavioural dimensions, meaning that accountability systems relying primarily on documentary indicators risk systematically overstating the true depth of pedagogical reform. The multilevel evidence further demonstrated that closing the gap between compliance and reform could not be achieved through school-level interventions alone, since a substantial and statistically robust share of the variance in reform depth resided at the district level, implicating district administrative capacity, resource allocation, and supervisory quality as co-equal targets for policy intervention alongside school-level training and funding.

Recommendations

The Ministry of Education and Sports should complement existing documentary compliance instruments (lesson plans, record books, inspection checklists) with periodic classroom-observation-based reform-depth indicators, so that national CBE progress reporting reflects substantive pedagogical change rather than procedural conformity alone.

Given that CBE-specific training hours and funding adequacy were the strongest positive predictors of reform depth, district education offices and development partners should prioritise sustained, well-resourced in-service training and instructional-materials funding for schools currently exhibiting low reform depth, rather than concentrating resources on already high-performing schools.

Because over a third of the variance in reform depth was attributable to district-level rather than school-level factors, policy interventions should explicitly target district administrative and supervisory capacity — including District Education Officer staffing, Coordinating Centre Tutor mentorship quality, and equitable distribution of monitoring resources — as a parallel strategy to school-level capacity building.

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