Article History
Received 26 August 2025, Accepted 10 August 2026

SCHOOL-LEVEL BRIBERY IN PUBLIC PRIMARY EDUCATION IN UGANDA

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Abstract: Despite stern anticorruption laws, and the government's pronounced ambition to offer education free of charge, there is evidence to suggest that many families in Uganda with children in public primary schools get solicitated for bribes. The present study examines why ordinary Ugandan parents and schoolteachers recurrently become involved in the lose-lose game of bribery. Drawing primarily on household survey data, this case study takes a deep dive into the institutional "bad barrels" in Uganda, and discusses the dynamics of school-level corruption alongside its effects on policy implementation. For the purpose of this analysis, principal-agent, collective action, and institutional theory, as well as problem-solving functionality and collaborative-network perspectives, are integrated into an ecological framework. By combining these different but complementary theoretical approaches, the study highlights the interaction between social, economic, cultural, relational, and situational factors that may make bribery seem necessary, rational, and worth the risk.

Keywords: *primary school-level corruption, monetary bribery, undermining of meritocracy, social ecology, theories of corruption*

Introduction

Uganda is a culturally and economically vibrant African country with an exceptionally young population. According to UN data presented by Worldometer (n.d.), half of Uganda's approximately 50 million inhabitants are 17 years old or younger. The share of Ugandans that are under 15 years of age is well over 40 percent (United Nations Population Fund n.d.), and the

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10.26806/modafr.v14i2.668

number of children enrolled in primary school quickly approaches the ten million mark (Katushabe 2023; Uganda Bureau of Statistics n.d.). In other words, the issue of education may be crucial for Uganda's future welfare and prospects of prosperity. Uganda was also one of the first countries in sub-Saharan Africa to introduce universal primary education, with school fees abolished back in 1997. The pronounced ambition with the reform was to reduce the financial burden for Ugandan families while making primary education available to all children, including those traditionally deprived of educational opportunities such as girls, children with disabilities, and orphans (Söderberg 2023; Ssekamwa 1999; Kim and Jun 2022: 2). In principle, the Ugandan Government's increasing commitment to invest in public primary schools has gone hand in hand with a decentralisation of the primary education sector (Kjær and Muwanga 2019), combined with legislative refinement, and the establishment of law-enforcement agencies to prevent financial mismanagement and corruption (Kakumba 2021, 2025: 8-9; Zimmermann and Riegner 2023: 22-23).

However, there is evidence to suggest that Ugandan public education has not been exempt from corruption. In December 2021, the Inspectorate of Government in Uganda released the eye-opening report *Cost and Extent of Corruption in the Education Sector in Uganda*. The Office of the Inspectorate of Government is the main law-enforcement agency in Uganda that focuses on corruption within public administrations (Sharpe 2018: 9-10). The publication, which is the latest of its kind, was based on a face-to-face survey in which a nationally representative sample of 1,600 households were asked about their circumstances during the twelve months before the COVID-19 lockdown, thus before January 2020. Respondents with school-aged children were asked specifically about the situation for their eldest child. To begin with, a key revelation in the report was that Ugandan households pay an estimated total of 40 billion Uganda Shillings, equivalent to well over ten million US dollars, annually in bribes pertaining to children's education. Secondly, bribery was found to be the most prevalent within primary school (Inspectorate of Government 2021: vii, 9-12). The share of respondents that disclosed having paid what was characterised as an education-related bribe on behalf of their eldest child was nine percent. Out of those, almost two-thirds (64%) said that the recipients were teachers, and in more than nine out of ten cases (91%), the payment method for the bribes was cash money (Inspectorate of Government 2021: 9-12).

The problem of bribery in Ugandan primary education has also been highlighted in other surveys. A relatively recent study by Afrobarometer, in which a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Ugandans were interviewed, showed that as many as over one-quarter (26%) of the respondents, who stated that they had had contact with public schools during the year prior to the study, had paid education-related bribes at least once in that period to a teacher or another school official (Kakumba 2021: 8). In comparison, data from another Afrobarometer survey suggest that about ten percent of Ugandan parents have paid bribes to get at least one of their children admitted to a specific primary school (Zimmermann and Riegner 2023: 26). In an earlier study by Afrobarometer it was found that a bit more than one in five Ugandans (21%), who had had contact with a public school during the twelve months prior to the interview, at least once in that period had given gifts, done favours, or paid bribes, to teachers or other school officials. In contrast, the corresponding 34-country, sub-Saharan African, average is about one in seven (15%), indicating that the bribery rate in Ugandan primary education is higher than in most other African countries (Krönke and Olan'g 2020: 14-15). However, in our opinion it is not necessarily the different surveys' specific numbers *per se* that is the main issue. It is also not always clear exactly how, for instance, the Inspectorate of Government's calculations were conducted, or if the Afrobarometer's researchers and respondents in all instances shared the same understanding of what constitutes a bribe. Instead, the bottom line is that bribery is presented by a Ugandan competent authority, as well as in independent research, as a significant problem in Uganda that arbitrarily raises the costs for pupils and parents, and thus undercuts public investments in education while restricting its availability, which in turn risks defeating the whole purpose of universal primary education (Kakumba 2021; Lugemoi 2019: 173; Inspectorate of Government 2021: 21).

The present study asks why Ugandan households pay bribes in public primary schools, and conversely why teachers solicit bribes from their pupils' families. Focusing on the outermost edge of education policy implementation, the main objective of the present article is to elucidate the drivers and mechanisms behind school-level corruption in Uganda, particularly the dynamics through which extortion for bribes becomes cast as justifiable for many teachers, and through which many ordinary parents become complicit. In a nutshell, the research question is why bribery persists in Ugandan primary education despite both stern anticorruption laws, and the government's pronounced ambition to offer education to all its citizens free of charge. The secondary aim of this study is to review how school-level corruption in a country like Uganda can be approached and conceptualised theoretically. In this regard, an integrative model will be presented that attempts to see the pertinent interactions in their sociocultural, economic, and institutional context. Overall, the occurrence of different kinds of bribery in school settings is well-documented (Heyneman, Anderson and Nuraliyeva 2008; Heyneman 2004, 2010). Yet, to date the scholarly focus on this particular aspect of the implementation end of education reform in Uganda has been relatively limited, leaving the topic largely underresearched (Hossain and Hickey 2019). Notably, the theoretical understanding of what causes bribery may in general be intimately connected with preferences regarding what measures should be taken to counter the problem. To recommend specific remedies against primary-school level corruption in a country like Uganda is outside the scope of the present study. However, in the process of fulfilling its primary objectives, a few focus areas for preventive measures are identified and highlighted.

Definitions and Characteristics of Bribery in Ugandan Primary Education

To answer the research questions at hand, we begin by defining key concepts, and specifying our understanding of what constitutes school-level corruption in Ugandan public primary education. First of all, corrupt practices in education settings can be both monetary and non-monetary. Hence, corruption in education can generally be defined as the abuse of authority for both material and personal gain. Since education is a public good, school-level corruption always involves an element of professional misconduct (Heyneman 2025: 364-365; 2004: 637, 644; 2003: 1659), which can pertain to individuals as well as institutions (Heyneman, Anderson and Nuraliyeva 2008: 3). In a stratified system like public education, there may be entry points of corruption at every stage, that is from early grades of primary school and throughout the academia (Transparency International 2013: xx). Likewise, corruption in education may occur at any administrative level of authority (Mugellini et al. 2021: 8; Kimeu 2013: 45). Different forms of corruption in education in Uganda and elsewhere may range from sexual exploitation of students to conscription of ghost teachers, or involve illicit practices regarding teacher placement, accreditation and licensing of schools, procurement of scholastic materials, allocation of dormitory spaces, utilisation of school property for commercial purposes, etc. (Heyneman 2004; Inspectorate of Government 2021). In the present study we set a limitation by exclusively focusing on corruption in the form of person-to-person monetary bribery at the implementation end of public policy, namely the service-delivery level of primary education (Mugellini et al. 2021: 7; Kimeu 2013: 45). Person-to-person corruption, as opposed to higher-level “grand” corruption schemes, here principally involves bribery of civil servants who perform comparatively routine tasks. Although the value of each transaction may be limited, it harms individuals and in the case of Uganda the aggregate sums are substantial (Inspectorate of Government 2021: 3-4; cf. Zimmermann and Riegner 2023: 12).

Ugandans in general are no strangers to monetary corruption in relation to public administration. Based on survey data from Transparency International and Afrobarometer, it has been estimated that approximately 40 percent of Ugandans pay bribes for public services on a yearly basis, which is significantly higher than in most other sub-Saharan African countries (Sharpe 2018: 3-4). In fact, bribery is the most common form of corruption that ordinary Ugandans come across in their daily lives, and can in its simplest form be defined as the unlawful selling of a specific decision by the official decision-maker (Inspectorate of Government 2021: 3; Zimmermann and Riegner 2023: 26, 10-11). However, based on effect and intention in the case of Uganda it is important to make a distinction between bribery and other kinds of informal payments. Since corruption in principle is covert, appreciation gifts openly awarded to deserving teachers are not bribes (Heyneman 2025: 363-64). In addition, Ugandan parents are recurrently asked to give unofficial, unreceipted, out-of-pocket “contributions” directly to public schools, or to Parent Teachers Associations, for extra scholastic materials, repairs or new facilities, meals, dormitory space, etcetera, some of which are within the grey area of what should be covered by the government (Kagoro 2024; Lugemoi 2019: 173; *Daily Monitor* 2018). Donations from parents to children’s overall learning environments may be a welcome compensation when the state funding for operating costs is insufficient. Nevertheless, when informal payments are made explicitly to first and foremost favour the donors’ own children it should be treated as corruption (Heyneman 2010: 16; 2025: 364).

In the Ugandan Inspectorate of Government’s (2021) report, the most often mentioned reasons for bribing teachers or other school officials are to ensure that certain children would get good grades, pass the exams, or be admitted to specific schools. Four in five (80%) of the respondents who had paid education-related bribes also believed that a refusal to do so would bring negative consequences, such as a child not being admitted to a school, being dismissed from school, receiving bad marks, or not passing a specific exam

(Inspectorate of Government 2021: 9-12). From a corruption perspective, it is our understanding that the most important exams in Ugandan primary education are the annual promotion tests and the Primary Leaving Examination. The promotion tests are taken before moving up a grade and can be administered locally, whereas the Primary Leaving Examination is administered by the Uganda National Examinations Board and is taken before completing primary school. Although the conduct of national exams is designed to contribute to social equity in Uganda (Heyneman 1983; Heyneman and Ransom 1990), this effect seems at least in part to be offset by the recurrent leakages of national exam papers. From what we have observed, leaked exam papers are sold beforehand to certain headteachers and schools, which in turn ask pupils for money to access the questions. The children then sit secretively in groups or individually with co-opted teachers to figure out the correct answers before taking the exam. Since the national exam papers persistently get leaked before distribution, national examination board staff, as well as government printery staff in Entebbe, appear to be complicit. To counteract cheating each district administration in Uganda coordinates the sending of designated invigilators to primary schools that can require, for instance, headteachers to open sealed envelopes with exam papers in their presence. However, the invigilators, who usually are teachers themselves, do not reach all schools in Uganda, and even when they do, they may get paid to look the other way. Hence, another form of primary school-level corruption is when teachers, in the absence of diligent invigilators, for a charge simply help their pupils to write the Primary Leaving Examination (Wenske and Ssentanda 2021: 11).

In the case of Uganda, it should be noted that the education quality, and thus learning outcomes, vary tremendously from school to school. The primary leaving examination results for each school often get published online or in local newspapers (see Söderberg, Berggren and Kumakech 2024). In our experience, the school-level bribery in Ugandan public education is fundamentally related to the fact that some primary schools are much more attractive than others. For example, even when it comes to public education, popular primary schools can often afford to have a "cut-off point" in their annual promotion tests, such as 60 percent correct answers. When children, who fail to reach the required test result, nonetheless want to move up a class, or even stay in school, parents may be asked by teachers to pay hefty sums for "extra tuition." In our assessment, this creates a vicious cycle in which high performing, and thus attractive, public primary schools in Uganda become incentivised both to off-roll underperforming pupils, and to extort various informal payments from parents, including monetary bribes. In cases where children have already been forced out of a public primary school due to low test scores, parents may be particularly vulnerable to solicitation of bribes from headteachers for new admissions.

Another typical scenario in which school-level bribery occurs in public primary education pertains to the circumstance that early childhood education opportunities are neither available nor affordable everywhere in Uganda. Still, according to our observations, to enrol a child in the first grade of a popular public school may require results from a nursery school. In cases when parents are unable to declare such results, informal negotiations with headteachers often follow. Parents may be informed that since children with no or limited preschool background need more assistance to catch up, special admission money must be paid to "motivate the teachers." Furthermore, similar instances of bribery in Ugandan primary schools may relate to transfers. When parents relocate and their children need to change schools, they may be told by school officials that they come from a low performing learning institution whose pupils do not "meet the standards" and therefore need more attention. In these situations, parents again can find themselves in informal negotiation situations where bribes framed as motivation money for teachers and headteachers get solicited.

Theory and Methodological Procedure

This study draws heavily on Transparency International's profound *Global Corruption Report: Education* (2013). Besides highlighting the devastating effects of corruption on meritocracy around the world, the report depicts education as particularly susceptible to corruption. Primary education essentially bears important credentials that families almost universally demand, while at the same time being a limited good that is possible to trade illicitly (Transparency International 2013: 6, 4; Inspectorate of Government 2021: 5). Furthermore, Transparency International (2013) underscores that the key to victory in the fight against corruption is to understand and draw attention to its underlying dynamics, and thus in effect diagnose the "disease" rather than its "symptoms" (Milovanovitch 2013: 233). In this regard, it has been widely argued that corruption in education should be seen as a complex, intricate, and evolving phenomenon with various causal underpinnings. Hence, rather than monocausal or unidimensional theorising, the analysis of corruption in education requires a comprehensive, multifactorial, or even multidisciplinary, approach (McDevitt 2013: 229; cf. Heyneman 2003:

1659; Mugellini et al. 2021: 7; Zimmermann and Riegner 2023: 11; Mukobi, Pillay and Mantzaris 2023: 206). In fact, one of our biggest takeaways from Transparency International's (2013) report is the pronounced need for theory development to grasp both the specifics and multilayered nature of practices such as school-level bribery.

The conceptualisation of corruption in primary education is far from merely an academic exercise. Instead, the respective theoretical understanding of the issue generally guides the selection of countermeasures, which ultimately may decide their outcomes (Persson, Rothstein and Teorell 2013; Inspectorate of Government 2021: 4, 6). For instance, based on in-depth interviews with more than 60 public officials, local NGO representatives, and journalists in Uganda and Kenya, the Swedish political scientists Anna Persson, Bo Rothstein, and Jan Teorell (2013) showed that there is a significant difference in terms of viewpoints among professionals in these countries, on the on hand, and the characterisation of corruption in many of the globally promoted, top-down, anticorruption programmes, on the other. In other words, the failure of many donor-driven anticorruption reforms in Uganda may be attributed to the inadequate theoretical foundations of their designs (Persson, Rothstein and Teorell 2013; Marquette and Peiffer 2015: 2). Still, despite the repeated calls for comprehensive and elaborate theorising, the reviewed literature, including Transparency International's (2013) and Inspectorate of Government's (2021) reports, are in our opinion not entirely clear about what such a multilevel model would look like in respect of school-level corruption in a country like Uganda.

Crime is inexorably committed by individuals, and a theoretical framework should acknowledge the agency of individual actors (Kaluya and Elliott 2018: 21-22; Mugellini et al. 2021: 4). Yet, since the perpetrators of school-level corruption in Ugandan education are mostly ordinary parents and schoolteachers, it would be an oversimplification to see their motives as solely triggered by opportunism and self-interest (Milovanovitch 2013: 234-235). According to survey findings, Ugandans in general attribute the widespread bribery in public administration less to greed and more to societal factors such as insufficient formal salaries (Sharpe 2018: 3-4). Likewise, although seemingly large shares of the population in Uganda have bribery-condoning attitudes (Awiti and Orwa 2019: 424; Awiti 2016: 1-2), the results are ambiguous, and people who engage in school-level bribery may not necessarily be driven by such attitudes. Instead, both actual corruption and bribery-condoning attitudes may be functions of incentivising social circumstances (Zimmermann and Riegner 2023: 27). In other words, it may primarily be the societal dynamics that cast what is socially justifiable that need to be explored (Stahl and Baez Camargo 2017: 2). Hence, for the purpose of this analysis, we propose an integrative model that brings into light the concept of ecology, which basically pronounces the interrelation between individuals and their environment. An ecological model may also potentially meet the asserted requirement noted above of a compound and multilayered conceptualisation of the reasons behind corruption in education (Bronfenbrenner 1979; McLeroy et al. 1988).

To take on the case of public primary education in Uganda, we have attempted to adapt and apply the ecological framework designed by the American public health scientist Kenneth McLeroy and colleagues' (1988). In our proposed version of the model, the social ecology relevant to the study of person-to-person corruption comprises five analytical levels, namely the individual, interaction, community, institution, and society. The overlapping circles illustrate the reciprocity between key factors of influence, and that these factors can be studied at different analytical levels. Arguably, this may offer a suitable starting point for conceptualising, for instance, how certain features of society are interlinked with organisational cultures of public institutions, and become entrenched in community-level network dynamics, which in turn can impact the atmosphere of interaction between individuals (Zimmermann and Riegner 2023; Appolloni and Nshombo 2014; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime n.d.). Variables such as interpersonal relationships, cultural influences, attitudes, ideology, or social and economic strain are not explicitly stated because they may operate on most, if not all, levels. However, the model is essentially schematic, and it does not explain corruption in education *per se*. Instead, it offers a mode in which different explanations and findings that pertain to bribery in Ugandan primary school can be integrated into one framework of analysis.

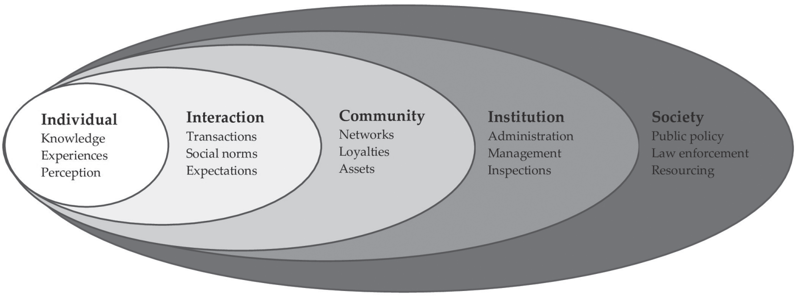

Figure 1. Ecological Model of School-level Corruption in Ugandan Primary Education. Source: Compiled by the authors.

To paint a fuller picture of why Ugandan teachers and parents engage in school-level bribery, a more in-depth examination may be necessary into how factors operating on different levels of the ecology are interconnected (Zimmermann and Riegner 2023; Kaluya and Elliott 2018). In this regard, the academic acknowledgement of corruption-driving linkages between individual behaviour and the social context, has sparked the advancement of several theoretical approaches to deconstruct these relationships. In consecutive order, this study presents and discusses the five perspectives listed in the table below. Notably, each perspective focuses on slightly different analytical levels of the social ecology, and each of them points to a distinct focus area for preventing school-level corruption in a country like Uganda.

Theoretical perspective	Scholarly works (e.g.)	Analytical level	Focus area
Principal-Agent Problem	Groenendijk 1997	Interaction	Transparency
Collective Action Problem	Persson, Rohtstein and Teorell 2013	Interaction/Institution	Accountability
Problem-Solving Functionality	Marquette and Peiffer 2015	Interaction/Society	Resource distribution
Collaborative-Network	Stahl and Baez Camargo 2017; Kaluya and Elliott 2018	Interaction/Community	Integrity
Institutional	Zimmermann and Riegner 2023	Institution/Interaction	Organisational culture

Figure 2. Table of Theoretical Perspectives on School-Level Corruption in Ugandan Primary Education. Source: Compiled by the authors.

The selection of perspectives was made based on the set of theoretical standpoints suggested by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (n.d.), and the Ugandan Inspectorate of Government (2021) respectively. Both the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (n.d.) and the Inspectorate of Government (2021), put forward the use of principal-agent and collective action theory. The Ugandan Inspectorate of Government (2021) also proposes institutional theory, whereas the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (n.d.) adds the perspective of problem-solving functionality. Here game theory was excluded since it may mainly apply to corruption in public procurement. Instead, following the Uganda-born, American economist Michael Kaluya and political scientist Euel Elliot

(2018), as well as the experts on African corruption Cosimo Stahl and Claudia Baez Camargo, a collaborative-network perspective was brought into view to better match the particularities of the Ugandan empirical reality. In turn, the empirical data discussed in this study are predominantly based on household surveys conducted in Uganda by the Inspectorate of Government (2021), as well as the Afrobarometer as presented by their principal Ugandan researcher Makanga Ronald Kakumba (2025, 2021). Finally, a selection of important works in the academic field were reviewed, with their key findings sorted thematically and integrated into the analysis (Kyazike, Kanyamurwa and Babalanda 2022).

Corruption in Ugandan Primary Education as a Principal-Agent Problem

Starting at the interaction level of the social ecology, one way to theoretically approach the question why school-level corruption in Ugandan primary education occurs, is to view it as a so-called principal-agent problem (Klitgaard 1988; Groenendijk 1997). From this perspective, parents or other guardians of schoolchildren are cast as the "principals," who turn to certain "agents," that is teachers and headteachers, to provide education for their children. In an ideal scenario, the agents solely serve the interest they have in common with the principals, which is the delivery of the best possible primary education. However, under conditions in which agents relatively freely can distribute sought-after resources, and prescribe the pay-off rules in relation to the principals, there may be considerable incentives for agents to act in their own interests even when it is to the detriment of principals (Inspectorate of Government 2021: 4; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime n.d.). In general, each stage of an education system can be understood as having "gatekeepers" such as persons who deal with exams or admissions to specific schools, and who subsequently may have considerable decision-making power over children's continuation of studies (Transparency International 2013: 6, 4). When agents in the form of individual teachers and headteachers have full discretion over grades and exams, or can help pupils slip through the gates of attractive schools, they become enabled to exploit their position. Hence, school-level corruption in a country like Uganda may actually be described as a *double* principal-agent problem, where education policymakers are the first principals and families with schoolchildren are the second. Neither policymakers nor parents can fully steer or monitor the actions of self-utility maximising education providers who use their bestowed agency for their own benefit (Marquette and Peiffer 2015: 4).

According to principal-agent theory, corruption is the most likely to occur when there is an asymmetry of information to the advantage of agents. In this case, that would imply that access to valid information is tilted in the favour of teachers and headteachers (Inspectorate of Government 2021: 4; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime n.d.). In this regard, the issue with information asymmetry in Uganda may be illustrated by the circumstance that many parents are unaware of what constitutes an illegal charge (Transparency International 2013: xix). For instance, about one in seven (14%) respondents in the Inspectorate of Government's (2021) household survey, who objectively were found to having paid bribes to teachers or other school officials, did not describe them as illicit transactions but rather as appreciation gifts (Inspectorate of Government 2021: 11). Particularly in rural Uganda, some parents have different poverty-related vulnerabilities such as illiteracy, exposure to misinformation, or misconception of education policies, which may limit their abilities to in all instances fully see the motives behind school-level economic exchanges (Namara 2020). Hence, from a principal-agent standpoint, the focus area to remedy bribery in Ugandan school settings is transparency. To establish better mechanisms of transparency regarding the administration of public primary schools would potentially level the playing field in terms of information. Likewise, better transparency can reduce the discretionary power of individual teachers and headteachers to make life-changing decisions over pupils, which in turn may curb opportunities for school officials to act at the expense of schoolchildren and their families (Inspectorate of Government 2021: 4; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime n.d.).

Corruption in Education as a Collective Action Problem

In African countries where corruption is widespread, countermeasures solely based on transparency-oriented frameworks may empirically not have had the lasting positive effects originally intended (Persson, Rothstein and Teorell 2013; Groenendijk 1997). For example, in Uganda there is a system in place with so-called School Management Committees, in which different stakeholders such as parents, cultural and religious leaders, and other members of the local community, are welcomed to monitor the operations and financial affairs of individual primary schools (Kjær and Muwanga 2019: 158-159; Hossain and Hickey 2019: 14-15). However, it has been reported that School Management Committees themselves often become involved in corrupt practices including bribery (Namara 2020: 5; Inspectorate of Government 2021: 30). In turn, the pervasiveness of corruption may illustrate the point that bribery in public sectors rather should be understood as a collective action problem (Persson, Rothstein and Teorell 2013: 456-457). In this context, a collective action problem can be said to emerge when there are specific, short-term incentives for people to act in ways that undermine the long-term collective goal of adequate primary education. Whereas all stakeholders would be better off with a sound education sector, bribery may make it possible for some actors to reap benefits associated with primary education without making the proper investments. For instance, a headteacher who observes that bribery is commonplace and lucrative may conclude that it does not make much economic sense to be the only one who behaves honestly within a corrupt system (Zimmermann and Riegner 2023: 12; Inspectorate of Government 2021: 7). Likewise, even Ugandan parents, who recognise that corruption weakens meritocracy, may engage teachers in the lose-lose game of bribery, especially if they perceive that others are doing the same thing for their children to get ahead (Marquette and Peiffer 2015: 10; Persson, Rothstein and Teorell 2013: 456-457).

From the viewpoint of collective action, both principals and agents are understood as responding to other actors' expectations, while behaving according to their level of trust or distrust in the pertinent institutions' abilities to effectively tackle corruption. Hence, the concept of collective action keeps the analytical focus on the cost-benefit decisions of individuals, while including quasi-rational influences on behaviour such as social norms or collectively shared perceptions of the conduct of others. It also binds together social norms and perceptions, that guide transactions between individuals at the interaction level, with the social ecology's institution level. Subsequently, the focus area for counteracting corruption in primary education is accountability. The key question here is not so much the nature of the institutions themselves but rather whether people within the public education sector in Uganda perceive that person-to-person corruption may render in punitive action (Persson, Rothstein and Teorell 2013: 456-457). Accordingly, to hold wrongdoers accountable through prosecution or other legal action would potentially pull the rug out from underneath school settings where cost-benefit decisions of individuals are skewed in favour of dishonesty (Inspectorate of Government 2021: 4; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime n.d.). In other words, the probability of sanctions being applied against corrupt actors, in combination with the seriousness of the sanctions applied, may determine the level of success of anticorruption measures (Mugellini et al. 2021: 4).

In Uganda, under the current policy framework of decentralised service provision, the statutory responsibility to provide public primary education has been handed over to the districts (Kjær and Muwanga 2019: 158-159; Namara 2020: 4; Alumu and Hassan 2019: 2). As of June 2026, Uganda has as many as 146 districts (Uganda Bureau of Statistics n.d.), yet the capability of each respective district administration to actually manage their public primary schools varies significantly (Söderberg, Berggren and Kumakech 2024). The "bureaucratic fragmentation" of public primary education in Uganda has overall resulted in insufficient inspection, supervision and monitoring of many schools, which in turn may contribute to a social climate of leniency in respect of corrupt practices (see Lugemoi 2019; Inspectorate of Government 2021: 18-19; Söderberg, Berggren and Kumakech 2024). Furthermore, many police officers and judges are themselves widely regarded as being involved in corruption (Kakumba 2021: 6). Symptomatically, over three-quarters (76%) of Ugandans who had been in contact with the police during the twelve months prior to the survey at hand, said that they were obliged to pay bribes to obtain police assistance (Kakumba 2025: 2-3). Hence, in the case of Uganda it has even been suggested that person-to-person corruption *per se* is a social norm, in the sense that it constitutes a point of reference that may shape and reproduce expectations regarding the interactions between seekers and providers of public services (Stahl and Baez Camargo 2017: 2). In turn, the deep-seated mistrust in law enforcement agencies may also prevent many people in Uganda from reporting corruption (Zimmermann and Riegner 2023: 30-31).

In the absence of effective law enforcement, together with the overall lack of institutional capacity to proactively monitor primary school activities in general, and teacher-parent transactions in particular, the potential "costs" of engaging in bribery in Uganda may become insignificant. From a cost-benefit perspective, and with regards to the institution level of the ecology, Ugandan teachers and headteachers do simply not get deterred from extorting bribes from pupils and their families (Lugemoi 2019: 173, 197; Adeleke and McSharry 2022: 3). Instead, for Ugandan parents to report solicitation of bribes to the authorities can involve significant costs (Hyll-Larsen 2013). In the latest Afrobarometer survey, more than four out of five (83%) Ugandans stated that ordinary people risk retaliation if they report corrupt practices such as bribery within public administration (Kakumba

2025: 2-3). Subsequently, even if bribes for teachers and headteachers in public primary education constitute heavy financial burdens for many Ugandan households, they may be regarded a "lesser evil" than, for instance, expensive private schools, or seeking redress within a judicial system permeated with corruption (Hyll-Larsen 2013: 57; Inspectorate of Government 2021).

The Problem-Solving Functionality of Corruption in Ugandan Primary Education

Rather than viewing corruption as merely extractive and inherently exploitive, it has been suggested that bribery relationships should be examined based on the purposes they serve in society and for those involved (Marquette and Peiffer 2015: 18). At least in theory, bribery can perhaps boost economic activity by "greasing the wheels" in response to slow and mismanaged bureaucracies (Mukobi, Pillay and Mantzaris 2023: 207). To engage in corrupt practices may also potentially reinforce social bonds and notions of mutual obligations between people, or work as a form of "civil disobedience" through which public services on occasion can be made available for those who otherwise would have been excluded (Marquette and Peiffer 2015: 18; Stahl and Baez Camargo 2017). Although hardly ideal, corruption may persist because it sometimes provides an interim "solution" to problems people face in their daily lives. Particularly in environments characterised by a scarcity of resources, ordinary citizens may engage in bribery to manage challenges associated with weaknesses in public service systems, which can be rooted in political and organisational failures (Marquette and Peiffer 2015). Hence, the functionality perspective may interconnect the interaction level of the social ecology with the broader political economy. In the case of Uganda, it essentially draws attention to the claims that the public primary education sector in general is under-resourced (United Nations Children's Fund 2023; Nabiddo, Yawe and Wasswa 2022: 111).

The introduction of universal primary education in Uganda in 1997 and the official banning of fees for public schooling, led to a massive influx of new pupils, and thus to significant overcrowding in many schools (Kjær and Muwanga, 2019: 153; Tromp and Datzberger 2019). The high annual population growth rate of 3% also makes it difficult for the Ugandan Government to keep up with the steady increase in demand for primary education (Uganda Bureau of Statistics n.d.; Inspectorate of Government 2021: 2). Reportedly, the financing inadequacies have led to chronic scarcities throughout Uganda of, for example, trained teachers and proper scholastic materials (Namara 2020; Tromp and Datzberger 2019). In fact, Ugandan class sizes in the lower grades of primary school typically exceed one hundred pupils, and in worst cases, reach up towards two hundred learners per teacher (see Söderberg, Berggren and Kumakech 2023; Lugemoi 2019: 290-291). Subsequently, rather than to succumb to the substandard education quality that would disallow most learning, Ugandan parents may choose to, for example, illicitly pay for admissions to better public schools, or to pay for grades and exams so that their children still can continue towards secondary school (Inspectorate of Government 2021: 11-12; cf. Milovanovitch 2013). In other words, bribery may for parents appear as a sensical pathway to cope with the symptoms of an economically mismanaged, or even "broken," primary education sector. Although corruption in primary education clearly creates far more problems than it solves, the perspective of a problem-solving functionality may basically highlight how structural deficiencies can be manifested in school-level transactions (Inspectorate of Government 2021: 6, 30).

Particularly in rural Uganda, primary school teachers are often faced with inadequate facilities, meagre incomes, difficult work conditions, the absence of programs where teachers and pupils share meals, a lack of staff quarters or otherwise expensive housing and transport, etc. (Söderberg, Berggren and Kumakech 2023). Salaries for primary school teachers within the public sector in Uganda are low even in comparison with other civil servants (Kabay 2021: 96; Namara 2020: 19), and are not always paid on time (Tromp and Datzberger 2019: 363). Hence, rather than for example absenting themselves to pursue alternative incomes outside school, underpaid teachers may enter a grey area of asking for gifts, favours or money from parents, which occasionally may amount to solicitation for bribes (Wilke, Green and Tan 2022: 916; Inspectorate of Government 2021: 5; Heyneman 2004: 639). Accordingly, from a functionality standpoint, person-to-person corruption in Ugandan primary schools can be seen as stemming from a systemic mismatch between, on the one hand, the requests and expectations of pupils, parents, and school professionals, and the actual deliverables of the public education sector, on the other (Milovanovitch 2013: 234-235). To tackle the problem is not just a matter of transparency and accountability in relation to education providers. Instead, from this perspective a reduction of school-level bribery in Uganda would require a focus shift towards the resource scarcity that the corrupt practices may be attempts to compensate for. Interaction-level incentives and social norms aside, a public primary education sector that better meets the material requirements of teachers and learners could be expected to be less corrupt (Inspectorate of Government 2021: 6; cf. Marquette and Peiffer 2015).

Collaborative-Network Corruption in Ugandan Primary Education

Based on the empirical reality in Uganda, cost-benefit decisions of individuals should not be understood as existing in a cultural vacuum. Instead, it may be important to take yet another step beyond the narrowest economic modelling that tends to see corrupt practices virtually in isolation from the broader cultural context (Mugellini et al. 2021: 4). On a fundamental conceptual level, the problem-solving functionality of corrupt practices requires a social network. In principle, for individuals or groups outside of such networks, corruption cannot provide any "solutions" in terms of coping with systemic and material mismatches (Inspectorate of Government 2021: 6). In the case of Uganda, when analysing the reasons behind school-level corruption it may be important to recognise the dozens of different ethno-regional and linguistic communities within its borders (Kyazike, Kanyamurwa and Babalanda 2022: 220), out of which several can be described as long-standing nations, subnational kingdoms, or coalesced factions, led by cultural chiefs or lineage heads. In fact, the plethora of communities in Uganda can be understood as a patchwork of semi-official, authority structures and alliances between people based on, for example, kinship, ethnicity, religion, geographical location, or political affiliation. In many instances, the local communities may be much more salient in terms of loyalty and identity formation than the Ugandan nation state (see Söderberg, Berggren and Kumakech 2024). The informal social networks in Uganda relevant to corruption start with the extended family but can involve any kind of acquaintances or "unholy alliances" within and between communities. Networks are also often built instrumentally to include important stakeholders or "useful connections" that are seen as potential facilitators in times of need (Kaluya and Elliott 2018: 19; Stahl and Baez Camargo 2017: 1-2).

The illicit practices in Uganda that either stem from social network arrangements, or are enabled by social network dynamics, have been labelled collaborative corruption (Kaluya and Elliott 2018: 19). In essence, collaborative corruption implies the blurring, or elimination, of the line between public officials' private interests and their public roles (Mugellini et al. 2021: 4). From this perspective, public officials are equally subject as anybody else in Uganda to the widely recognised social norms that prescribe individuals to share resources with their respective social network. In this regard, Ugandan teachers and headteachers may be obliged to reciprocate the favours and gifts that they were given in their respective communities throughout their lifetimes, even when it conflicts with their official duties (Stahl and Baez Camargo 2017: 1-2). The general culture in Uganda has been characterised as oriented towards the collective rather than the individual, which also has been pointed out as underpinning some of the corrupt practices within Ugandan public administration (Kaluya and Elliott 2018: 22). In this regard, teachers and headteachers may come under significant pressure from relatives, friends, or acquaintances, to misuse the authority that comes with their positions and, regardless of merit, fulfil expectations of favourable treatment of certain pupils. In other words, the motivation behind corrupt practices may be less about direct individual gain and more about satisfying the interests of specific networks (Stahl and Baez Camargo 2017; cf. Heyneman 2007: 314; Heyneman 2025: 365).

According to the collaborative-network perspective, there are at least two basic conditions for the development of illicit collaborative arrangements between civil servants and ordinary citizens. First, there needs to be a common belief that the exchanges can be mutually beneficial; second, there must be a shared understanding that corruption can be a viable option to “get things done.” It has also been pointed out that bribery within public administration is something that is regularly discussed in Uganda. In other words, people typically know how, and in which situations, they can engage in illicit payments and gift giving (Kaluya and Elliott 2018: 20-22). Moreover, collaborative corruption in Uganda can take the form of long-standing, *quid pro quo* relationships within well-established networks. Yet, parents of children in primary school may also strategically approach specific teachers or headteachers with gifts as means to proactively co-opt them into their own informal social networks. Indeed, to “come prepared” for a meeting with a public official usually means that money has been collected beforehand, or that one’s network has been mobilised in order to find an acquaintance that can act as facilitator. Teachers and other officials in Uganda who are “successful providers” in the sense that they favour and benefit their respective social network, may be respected and admired irrespective of the sources of the redistributed resources. Conversely, law-abiding officials who do not deliver services in the form and quantity that are demanded by their respective group, often get shamed or ostracised (Stahl and Baez Camargo 2017: 1-2; Kaluya and Elliott 2018: 22). In our experience, reprisals against Ugandan teachers in these situations can be odd punishments such as transfers to poor rural schools, early retirements, or terminations of employment by district authorities, based on cooked-up crimes of mismanagement of government funds.

Particularity in settings where provisions are unequal and resources are insufficient, social networks may facilitate and reproduce the collective strategy of corrupt practices. Under such circumstances, acts of school-level corruption may range from one-off transactions, to perpetual exchanges within a local economy of network collaboration. Although corruption for the sole purpose of self-enrichment is widely condemned in Uganda, the provision of in-group benefits may generally be regarded as adhering to the socially prescribed duties of solidarity *vis-à-vis* the group. Hence, a Ugandan teacher who, for example, solicits bribes from parents to pay for a relative's wedding or funeral may act well within social boundaries (Stahl and Baez Camargo 2017: 1-2). Arguably, the role of culturally entrenched networks at the community level of the social ecology may largely explain why person-to-person corruption in primary education is so difficult to mitigate in a country like Uganda. From the collaborative-network perspective, preventative measures against school-level bribery should primarily focus on professional integrity. To reduce corruption in Ugandan primary schools it would be necessary to promote integrity by forming a new cultural consensus that all civil servants exclusively should serve the public according to their formal professional responsibilities. In other words, there would need to be a complete separation in Uganda of the working lives of school staff, and the interests of the informal networks they may belong to (Kaluya and Elliott 2018: 22, 19; see Stahl and Baez Camargo 2017: 1-2).

Institutional Theory of Corruption in Education

Complex social behaviour such as corrupt practices in primary education may be approached theoretically also from the viewpoint of their institutional underpinnings. The institutional level of the social ecology is arguably vital for the understanding of how both public service delivery and policy implementation are impacted by the particularities of public administration. Basically, public institutions can be understood as structures of governance that embody authority, routines, standards-generating, and guidelines for collective action. Since people tend to adapt to institutional conditions, they may constitute valid components of the social ecology. In other words, institutions comprise dynamic mechanisms that both constrain and channel new arrangements of social conduct (Scott 2004: 408, 412). In the case of Uganda, it has been put forward that the functioning of public administrations generally is based on "deals" rather than "rules" in the sense that informal bargaining between stakeholders often take precedence over formalised bureaucratic processes (Hickey and Hossain 2019: 26). From this viewpoint, public institutions also have cultural-cognitive components such as shared beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes, which undergird, as well as give meaning to, people's behaviour (Kaluya and Elliott 2018: 23; Scott 2004: 408-409). How education systems are organised may directly reflect a society's underlying social structures and sociocultural fabric. Hence, a comprehensive conceptual framework of school-level corruption should perhaps focus less on individual "bad apples" and more on the institutional "bad barrels" (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime n.d.).

The cultural-cognitive features of public institutions in Uganda basically mean that school-level corruption can be attributed to corrupt practices "higher up the ladder," which may have set the tone for the rest of the sector (Transparency International 2013: xix-xxi, 4). In this regard, it has been widely noted that some of the financial resources allocated to public primary education in Uganda disappear at the top levels of the organisational hierarchy (Tromp and Datzberger 2019: 364; Inspectorate of Government 2021: 3). It has even been argued that the Ugandan primary education sector can be conceptualised as more or less regulated informally by connections seeking, in-group favouritism, and different kinds of bribery (Stahl and Baez Camargo 2017: 1-2). Symptomatically it has also been found that generally when public institutions in Africa become afflicted by illicit mismanagement of funds, not only is the effectiveness of public spending compromised, but teachers also tend to become more involved in corrupt practices (Fomba, Talla and Ningaye 2023: 108). In addition, Ugandan primary school teachers themselves recurrently get extorted for bribes by public officials at the district level when, for instance, applying for new jobs, asking for promotions, or requesting for transfers to more attractive schools (Abu-Baker 2016: 241; Inspectorate of Government 2021: 22-23). Not surprisingly, school-level corruption may increase when teachers perceive that the mismanagement of funds at ministerial, district, and school-management levels have become endemic, and thus leaves them devalued, underpaid, and demoralised (Transparency International 2013: xix-xxi, 4).

From an institution theoretical standpoint, service delivery-level bribery may be the outcome of a vicious cycle of cause and effect. Since corruption negatively impacts the overall efficiency of public spending on education in Uganda, it subsequently undermines school resourcing, learning outcomes, and teacher renumeration (Inspectorate of Government 2021; Fomba, Talla and Ningaye 2023: 89, 108). Hence, corruption exacerbates the material deficiencies that Ugandan teachers and parents may try to manage by bending, bypassing, or breaking the law (cf. Hyll-Larsen 2013: 57; Milovanovitch 2013: 234-235). From this perspective, the Ugandan education sector also embodies an ongoing cultural normalisation process in relation to corruption, which both reproduces and cements practices such as bribery (Scott 2004; Kaluya and Elliott 2018). Accordingly, person-to-person corruption in primary schools can be understood as the outcome of an institutionalisation of sentiments that cast bribery as a privilege of certain professional positions, or as a default strategy for ordinary people to receive public services, and thus as a routine “part of life” (Stahl and Baez Camargo 2017: 2). As far as people in general may base their decisions about whether or not to engage in bribery on their perceptions of the general level of corruption within the public sector in question, bribery in Ugandan primary education may actually risk becoming a self-playing piano (Zimmermann and Riegner 2023: 27; Lugemoi 2019: 173; Kaluya and Elliott 2018: 23). To break this corruption-driving cycle in Uganda, it would be necessary to design a public education sector that legitimises its existence via a sound management and distribution of resources, as well as by exclusively serving its originally designated purpose of providing adequate primary education to all Ugandan children. Finally, the actors with the most power and influence over public administrations in Uganda must lead by example in the establishing of an organisational culture in public education based on the rule of law, objectivity, and neutrality (cf. Hyll-Larsen 2013: 57; Milovanovitch 2013: 234-235).

Conclusion

For the purpose of analysing school-level corruption within the public primary education sector in a country like Uganda, we advance the proposition that the five perspectives discussed in this study are complementary. Arguably, each of the theoretical approaches outlined above adds important pieces to the complex puzzle of understanding the reasons behind school-level bribery. Rather than representing mutually exclusive or opposing views, they may constitute lenses that highlight the different sets of factors that fill out the others’ contributions (cf. Marquette and Peiffer 2015: 19). Secondly, the reviewed perspectives are compatible in the sense that they share the fundamental economic stipulations that individuals respond rationally to the information and incentives they are faced with, which in our opinion makes them possible to combine into a single model. In this regard, our suggested adaptation of the ecological framework allows for a multilayered, yet interconnected and coherent, view of these particular actions of individuals within their cultural and social context. From an ecological standpoint, the cost-benefit decisions of individual actors may depend on, for instance, perceptual dynamics as well as on situational, relational, and societal influences. In other words, they are highly susceptible to change (Kaluya and Elliott 2018; Mugellini et al. 2021). Accordingly, the key to anticorruption victory in Ugandan public education is not to choose one single-component intervention over another, but rather to seek synergy effects from interventions that simultaneously deal with transparency, accountability, resourcing, professional integrity, and the organisational culture of the pertinent institutions. A recognition of corruption-driving factors on various analytical levels may ideally aid designs of measures that address both corrupt individuals and the wider social and economic conditions that incentivise bribery in Ugandan primary schools.

Any school-level transaction in Uganda between teachers and pupils should be considered against the backdrop of the national policy of universal primary education. In principle, the policy entails that public primary schools are disallowed to request school fees. However, the high enrolment and overcrowding of many schools that followed in its tracks may in many instances have come at the expense of education quality. In turn, the quality issues including disparities in learning outcomes between different districts, as well as between different public schools within the same areas, may have been exacerbated by the current decentralisation of the Ugandan primary school sector (Söderberg, Berggren and Kumakech 2024; Namara 2000; Heyneman and Stern 2014). Hence, school-level corruption may basically be the manifestation of a societal failure in Uganda to reach equilibrium in a just and meritocratic fashion between demand and supply of adequate-standard primary education (Transparency International 2013: 4; Marquette and Peiffer 2015: 14). Ugandan parents who feel the pinch of deficient education quality may bribe their way to grades and admissions, thinking that their children otherwise neither would receive the schooling, nor the educational future, they believe they have been promised (Zimmermann and Riegner 2023: 12; Söderberg 2023; see Stahl and Baez Camargo 2017). Ironically, the solicitation of bribes from pupils and their families is in outright contradiction to the idea of universal primary education. From a social ecological standpoint, a policy implementation in Uganda that was more in touch with the realities on the ground, with a resourcing that better accommodates the needs of its stakeholders, would possibly entail a less corrupt education sector (cf. Milovanovitch 2013: 234-235).

As discussed above, rather than fair play disenfranchised Ugandan parents may meet public primary school settings that present entry points for systemic corruption, and may be negatively influenced by the wheeling and dealing of the upper echelons of the education sector. Instead of effectively counteracting service delivery-level corruption, the institutional workings of Ugandan primary school can practically even be seen as establishing bribery relationships as a norm (cf. Kaluya and Elliott 2018: 20-22). In turn, bribery may appear as a viable option for parents, who may already perceive the public sector to be more or less permeated with corruption, when they for the sake of their children's learning seek interim "solutions" to work around the inadequate quality of many Ugandan primary schools. In these situations, the local informal networks in Uganda may reportedly step in to assist in finding the right connections, or the right "gatekeepers" with the right discretionary power over educational opportunities, to approach with the right kinds of gifts, favours, or illicit payments. Hence, in an overall atmosphere of leniency in Uganda, with an information asymmetry to the advantage of education providers, and with authorities neither capable of nor willing to impose effective sanctions, the scarcity of adequate primary education may rig the cost-benefit calculus for pupils and their families so that person-to-person corruption seems rational, necessary, and worth the risk (Hyll-Larsen 2013: 57; Milovanovitch 2013: 233).

On the other side of the transaction, teachers and headteachers in Ugandan public primary school, who formally are civil servants, may feel the pressure to engage in corrupt practices when persuasive or strong actors within their informal social networks start to call in favours (cf. Stahl and Baez Camargo 2017). As noted in the discussion above, a fertile breeding ground for opportunistic acceptances of bribes would be where an unorthodox management of funds is already socially normalised, and there is a general institutional climate of mistrust and impunity in relation to corruption. Likewise, a high-risk situation may emerge when there is a significant difference between, on the one hand, the actual market value of the teachers' roles, and their formal remuneration on the other. In other words, where the stakes for completing primary school are high, yet teacher salaries are not paid on time, or teachers are paid less than what is required to make a decent living, the likelihood of school-level bribery goes up (Heyneman, Anderson and Nuraliyeva 2008: 7-8). Moreover, when the reporting of corruption gets associated with risks of reprisals, the incentives to partake in corruption may simply be stronger than to oppose it (Inspectorate of Government 2021; Marquette and Peiffer 2015: 20; Persson, Rothstein and Teorell 2013: 456-457).

If a primary education sector is corrupt, future citizens can unfortunately also be expected to be corrupt (Heyneman, Anderson and Nuraliyeva 2008: 3). In turn, those who bribe themselves to education success without merit may later swell the ranks of incompetent leaders in society, including within the public education sector (Transparency International 2013: 5-6; Heyneman 2007: 313). Hence, the corruption-related undermining of meritocracy in Uganda *per se* may, through this self-reinforcing feedback loop, pave the way for even more corruption in Ugandan primary education (Milovanovitch 2013: 234-235; Heyneman, Anderson and Nuraliyeva 2008). Conversely, a strengthening of meritocracy, via adequate and well-informed measures against corruption in education, may potentially help give the younger generation in Uganda the future of social and economic prosperity it deserves.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest is reported by the authors.

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