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Student Ranking Practices and Their Implications for Academic Performance among Students in Public Secondary Schools in Musoma Municipal Council, Tanzania

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Abstract : This study examined student ranking practices and their implications for academic performance among students in public secondary schools in Musoma Municipal Council, Tanzania. The study was guided by Social Comparison Theory developed by Festinger in 1954 and employed a mixed-methods approach using a convergent parallel research design. The study targeted 18,287 participants and involved a sample of 188 participants comprising 1 Municipal Education Officer, 3 Ward Education Officers, 4 Heads of Schools, 81 teachers, and 99 students. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires, while qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS Version 26 through frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. The findings revealed that student ranking practices motivate learners to improve their academic performance, encourage academic competition, help teachers monitor students' academic progress, identify learners requiring additional support, and strengthen students' commitment to their studies. However, the findings also showed that excessive emphasis on ranking may create academic pressure, discourage consistently low-performing students, and reduce their confidence and participation in learning. The study concludes that student ranking practices have both positive and negative implications for academic performance depending on how they are implemented and experienced by learners. The study recommends that schools use ranking constructively as a tool for motivation and academic improvement, while combining it with continuous assessment, guidance and counselling, remedial teaching, and individual academic support. Schools should also recognize students' improvement and effort and avoid public labelling or humiliation of low-performing learners.

Keyword : Student ranking, academic performance, academic competition

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INTRODUCTION

Student ranking practices have remained a common approach through which schools communicate differences in learners' academic achievement. The practice involves arranging students according to their performance in tests, examinations, assignments, or other forms of assessment, usually from the highest to the lowest achievers. Ranking is often intended to provide information about students' academic progress, encourage effort, and help teachers identify learners who may require additional academic support. However, the educational implications of ranking depend on how the practice is implemented and interpreted. Evidence indicates that ordinal academic rank can influence subsequent educational outcomes beyond students' underlying ability, suggesting that students' positions within a class may shape their academic experiences and future performance (Murphy & Weinhardt, 2020).

At the international level, student ranking is closely associated with academic competition and recognition of achievement. Ranking may encourage students to work harder when they perceive academic position as an important indicator of success. Recent evidence shows, however, that rank-based academic rewards can also change how students respond to their classmates, particularly when learners compete for recognition based on relative performance. Rosenzweig and Xu (2026) found that highly competitive ranking environments may reduce students' willingness to support peers academically and can influence their learning effort. This suggests that although ranking may encourage some students to improve their academic performance, excessive emphasis on position may create unhealthy competition and reduce opportunities for collaborative learning. Therefore, student ranking practices may have both positive and negative implications for academic performance depending on the learning environment in which they are applied.

In African education systems, academic ranking is also used to create competition and distinguish levels of achievement among learners and schools. In many contexts, examination performance is strongly associated with perceptions of academic success, leading schools and teachers to place considerable emphasis on examination outcomes. The uploaded literature similarly indicates that excessive emphasis on examination performance can encourage competition, examination-oriented teaching, and pressure among learners (Zhao, 2021; Harlen, 2020). In this environment, ranking individual students may motivate high achievers to maintain their positions, while students who consistently occupy lower positions may experience discouragement or develop negative perceptions of their

academic abilities. Consequently, the practice requires careful consideration because academic performance may be influenced not only by students' ability and effort but also by how they experience and respond to their position relative to their peers.

In Tanzania, academic performance remains an important basis for evaluating students' educational achievement, while examination results are also widely used to compare performance across schools. The National Examinations Council of Tanzania (NECTA) continues to publish national examination results, providing performance information that enables comparison of academic achievement across candidates and schools. Research in the Tanzanian context has also observed that comparing academic performance through ranking has become a common practice, with schools positioned according to the average performance of their students (Joshua, 2025). The practice can encourage teachers and learners to work towards improving academic outcomes, but persistent pressure to maintain high positions may also influence classroom practices and students' learning experiences. Therefore, examining student ranking at the individual learner level is important because school-level examination rankings may not adequately explain how being ranked first, middle, or last affects students' academic performance.

In Musoma Municipal Council, public secondary schools are expected to improve students' academic achievement and provide an environment that supports effective learning. However, differences in students' academic performance continue to make academic comparison and performance monitoring important concerns for schools and education stakeholders. The existing evidence in the study context indicates that examination results remain an important indicator of school achievement, while empirical evidence explaining the influence of ranking practices on educational outcomes in Musoma Municipal remains limited. Although ranking may encourage students to increase their effort and compete for better positions, it may also create pressure, discourage lower-ranked learners, or influence how students perceive their academic abilities. Therefore, this study seeks to examine student ranking practices and their implications for academic performance among students in public secondary schools in Musoma Municipal Council, Tanzania, with particular attention to how ranking practices relate to students' academic achievement.

Theoretical Review

This study is guided by the Social Comparison Theory, developed by Leon Festinger in 1954. The theory explains that individuals evaluate their abilities, achievements, and

performance by comparing themselves with others. In the educational context, students may compare their test scores, examination results, grades, and academic positions with those of their classmates. Such comparisons may influence students' motivation, self-confidence, attitudes, and willingness to improve their academic performance. In relation to this study, student ranking practices provide a visible basis for such comparisons because students can identify whether they are performing above, below, or at a similar level to their peers. Positive comparisons may encourage students to increase their academic effort and maintain or improve their positions, while unfavourable comparisons may result in discouragement, anxiety, reduced confidence, or decreased academic effort. Therefore, Social Comparison Theory provides a useful framework for understanding the implications of student ranking practices for academic performance among students in public secondary schools in Musoma Municipal Council.

Literature Review

Studies conducted in the United States, Germany, Sweden, Finland, and Asia indicate that student ranking based on examination performance can have both positive and negative effects on academic performance and educational standards. Jennings and Pallas (2021), Hurrelmann (2022), Forsberg (2020), Sahlberg (2021), and Zhang (2023) found that ranking can increase academic competition, motivation, accountability, commitment, and examination performance, particularly among high-achieving students. However, excessive emphasis on ranking was associated with anxiety, fear of failure, reduced cooperation, low self-esteem, rote learning, and negative attitudes among low-ranked students. These studies generally recommended balancing ranking with formative, competency-based, and learner-centred assessment approaches.

Studies from Africa similarly show mixed effects of examination-based student ranking. Hassan (2022) in Egypt and Asare (2023) in Ghana found that ranking motivated students to improve examination performance and encouraged parental involvement, but also created academic stress and feelings of inferiority among lower-ranked students. Ololube (2022) in Nigeria reported increased academic effort and teachers' commitment to syllabus coverage, although unhealthy competition and examination malpractice were also observed. Orina (2024) in Kenya found that ranking improved academic competition and examination performance but contributed to anxiety and unhealthy rivalry, while Habimana (2021) in Rwanda reported improved academic discipline and classroom participation alongside reduced confidence among low-ranked students. These studies recommend supportive assessment systems, counselling, inclusive

teaching, and a balanced approach to academic competition.

The reviewed studies also reveal methodological, geographical, and contextual gaps. Some studies, such as Jennings and Pallas (2021), Hassan (2022), and Ololube (2022), relied mainly on quantitative or correlational approaches, limiting detailed explanations of students' experiences with ranking. Others, such as Forsberg (2020) and Sahlberg (2021), used qualitative approaches or small samples, which may limit generalisation. Although studies from Kenya, Ghana, Rwanda, and Nigeria provide useful African evidence, their educational contexts differ from Tanzania. Moreover, most of the reviewed studies were conducted outside Musoma Municipal, creating a geographical and contextual gap concerning public secondary schools in the area.

In Tanzania, Tarmo (2022) found that assessment for learning improved students' academic achievement more effectively than traditional examination-focused approaches. However, the study focused generally on assessment practices rather than specifically on students' positioning through examination ranking. Overall, the reviewed literature suggests that student ranking can motivate academic effort and improve examination performance, but excessive ranking may also produce anxiety, unhealthy competition, low confidence, and examination-oriented learning. Therefore, there remains a need for context-specific evidence on how examination-based ranking practices affect students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Musoma Municipal. The present study addresses this gap by using a mixed-methods approach to combine quantitative evidence with qualitative explanations of students' and other stakeholders' experiences.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a mixed-methods approach using a convergent parallel research design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected, analysed separately, and integrated during interpretation to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effects of examination-based ranking on educational standards in public secondary schools in Musoma Municipal. The study was conducted in Musoma Municipal, Mara Region, and targeted 18,287 participants, comprising 1 Municipal Education Officer, 16 Ward Education Officers, 21 Heads of Schools, 433 teachers, and 17,816 students. A sample of 188 participants was selected through purposive, stratified, and simple random sampling, including 1 MEO, 3 WEOs, 4 Heads of Schools, 81 teachers, and 99 students. Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires, while qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with education officers and

school heads. A pilot study involving teachers, students, a school head, and a WEO was conducted outside the main sample to assess the instruments. Validity was established through face and content review by research experts, while reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, producing coefficients of 0.740 for teachers and 0.832 for students, which exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.70. Qualitative trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Data were analysed using SPSS Version 26, and interpreted using descriptive statistics while interview data were analysed thematically through coding, categorisation, and development of themes, with the two sets of findings integrated during interpretation. Data collection followed the required institutional and administrative permissions, and ethical principles including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, protection of participants, academic integrity, and proper citation were observed throughout the study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The study examined the effects of student ranking practices on academic performance in public secondary schools in Musoma Municipal. Data were collected from teachers and students using 5-point Likert scale questions. Respondents were required to indicate whether they disagreed, were neutral, or agreed with statements related to the effects of student ranking practices on educational standards. The quantitative data were analyzed using frequency distributions and percentages, and presented in tables to show the respondents' responses.

Teachers' Responses on the Effects of Student Ranking Practices on Academic Performance

Teachers were provided with 5-point Likert-scale statements regarding the effects of student ranking practices on academic performance in public secondary schools in Musoma Municipal. Respondents were required to indicate their level of agreement with each statement by selecting disagreed, neutral, or agreed. The responses obtained from teachers are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Teachers' Responses on the Effects of Student Examination Ranking Practices on Academic Performance (n=72)

No.	Statement	Disagree		Neutral		Agree	
		f	%	f	%	f	%
i.	Student ranking practices motivate students to improve their academic performance.	1	1.4	8	11.1	63	87.5
ii.	Examination-based student ranking helps teachers effectively monitor students'	1	1.4	7	9.7	64	88.9

	academic progress.						
iii.	Student ranking practices help teachers identify students who need improvement in their academic performance.	3	4.2	11	15.3	58	80.6
iv.	Student ranking practices encourage healthy academic competition among students.	2	2.8	17	23.6	53	73.6
v.	Student ranking practices create excessive pressure that negatively affects students' learning outcomes.	25	34.7	18	25.0	29	40.3

Source: Field Data (2026)

Table 1 presents teachers' responses regarding the effects of student examination ranking practices on academic performance. The findings are organized by statement, with responses categorized as Disagree, Neutral, and Agree, and presented as frequencies (F) and percentages (%).

Student Ranking Practices Motivate Students to Improve Their Academic Performance

The findings show that 63 teachers (87.5%) agreed that student ranking practices motivate students to improve their academic performance, while 8 teachers (11.1%) were neutral and 1 teacher (1.4%) disagreed. This high level of agreement indicates that teachers generally perceive ranking as an important motivational mechanism that encourages students to work harder and improve their examination performance. The quantitative finding from one of the respondents stated:

> *"Student ranking practices motivate many students to work harder to improve their academic performance. They encourage learners to put more effort into their studies and teachers to provide effective instruction and support students in achieving better examination results, thereby contributing to improved academic performance and educational standards"* (Interviewee H_1, July 2026).

This finding implies that student ranking can contribute to improved educational standards by encouraging students to increase their academic effort and motivating teachers to strengthen teaching and academic support practices. Ranking provides students with a clear indication of their academic position, which may encourage them to set higher performance targets, monitor their progress, and strive for better examination results. It may also help teachers identify differences in students' performance and provide appropriate support to those who need additional assistance. However, ranking should be implemented constructively to ensure that competition motivates learners to improve while avoiding practices that

may discourage students who consistently perform at lower levels.

The finding is supported by Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), which posits that individuals evaluate their abilities and achievements by comparing themselves with others. In this context, students may compare their examination positions with those of their peers, particularly higher-performing peers, and be motivated to improve their own performance. Such comparison can encourage students to set academic goals and increase their learning effort. The finding is also consistent with Jennings and Pallas (2021), who found that examination-based positioning increased academic competition and improved examination performance among high-achieving students. Similarly, Asare (2023) reported that examination ranking motivated students to improve academically and enhanced school performance. These findings suggest that ranking can serve as a motivational and feedback mechanism when appropriately integrated with effective teaching, constructive feedback, and support for individual student improvement.

Examination-Based Student Ranking Helps Teachers Monitor Students' Academic Progress Effectively

The findings indicate that 64 teachers (88.9%) agreed, 7 teachers (9.7%) were neutral, and 1 teacher (1.4%) disagreed that examination-based student ranking helps teachers monitor students' academic progress effectively. This was the highest percentage of agreement in the table, suggesting that teachers strongly recognize the usefulness of ranking in identifying differences in students' performance and monitoring academic progress. Furthermore, one of the respondents stated that,

> *"Ranking also helps the school identify high-performing and low-performing students, making it easier to provide appropriate academic support where needed. It enables teachers to understand students' performance levels, identify those experiencing academic difficulties, and provide appropriate interventions to improve their learning outcomes"* (Interview H_2, July 2026).

This indicates that ranking provides teachers with useful information for monitoring academic progress, identifying learning difficulties, and providing targeted academic support. When ranking results are used diagnostically rather than simply for comparison, they can help teachers identify students who require remedial instruction, closer monitoring, or additional learning support, while also recognizing students who demonstrate strong academic performance. This can strengthen evidence-based instructional planning and enable schools to respond more effectively to differences in students' learning needs.

The finding is supported by Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), which posits that individuals evaluate their abilities and performance by comparing themselves with others. Ranking therefore provides a reference point for identifying differences in academic achievement and can help teachers understand students' relative performance. The finding is also consistent with Nziku and Matogwa (2021), who found that examination performance and student positioning were associated with factors influencing academic achievement. Tarmo (2022) further emphasized the importance of assessment practices in identifying students' learning needs and improving academic achievement. Thus, the findings suggest that the educational value of ranking is strengthened when schools use performance information to guide timely academic interventions and continuous monitoring of students' progress.

Student Ranking Practices Help Teachers Identify Students Who Need Improvement

The results show that 58 teachers (80.6%) agreed, 11 teachers (15.3%) were neutral, and 3 teachers (4.2%) disagreed that student ranking practices help teachers identify students who need improvement in their academic performance. The high level of agreement indicates that most teachers perceive ranking as a useful tool for identifying students' academic strengths and weaknesses. By examining students' positions and examination results, teachers can identify learners who are performing below expectations and provide appropriate academic support to improve their performance.

The finding was supported by one of the interview respondents who stated that:

> *"Ranking helps teachers identify students who are performing below expectations and need additional support. By comparing students' examination results, teachers can determine areas where learners are struggling and provide appropriate assistance to help them improve their performance"* (Interviewee W1, July 2026).

The finding implies that student ranking can provide teachers with useful information for monitoring students' academic progress and identifying performance gaps. Such information can guide teachers in providing remedial teaching, individual assistance, and other interventions to students who require additional support. Therefore, when ranking results are used constructively, they can contribute to continuous improvement in students' academic performance.

This finding is supported by Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), which explains that individuals evaluate their performance by

comparing themselves with others. In the school context, ranking provides teachers with a reference point for comparing students' academic performance and identifying those who may require additional support. The finding is also consistent with Hurrelmann (2022), who found that examination-based positioning promoted academic monitoring and accountability, while Zhang (2023) reported that examination positioning helped identify differences in students' academic performance and encouraged greater commitment to academic improvement.

Student Ranking Practices Encourage Healthy Academic Competition Among Students

The findings indicate that 53 teachers (73.6%) agreed, 17 teachers (23.6%) were neutral, and 2 teachers (2.8%) disagreed that student ranking practices encourage healthy academic competition. This suggests that ranking generally stimulates competition among students, as learners may be encouraged to work harder to improve their positions. However, the relatively higher neutral response suggests that some teachers may not consider all forms of ranking-based competition healthy. Moreover, during the interview one of the respondents added that,

> *"Ranking creates competition among both teachers and students. When a student is ranked first, it increases their motivation to put more effort into their studies to maintain that position. Similarly, when a school performs well and achieves a leading position, teachers become motivated to work harder to maintain or improve their ranking".* (Interviewee W_2, July 2026).

This shows that ranking can promote constructive academic competition by encouraging both students and teachers to increase their effort and strive for improved performance. Competition may provide students with clear performance goals and encourage them to monitor their academic progress, while teachers may become more committed to improving instructional practices and supporting better examination outcomes. However, the finding also highlights the need for schools to ensure that competition remains supportive by emphasizing individual improvement, effort, and academic progress rather than humiliation or excessive comparison. The finding is supported by Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), which explains that individuals evaluate their abilities and achievements by comparing themselves with others. Students may compare their positions with higher-performing peers and become motivated to improve their own achievement. The finding is also consistent with Forsberg (2020), who found that academic ranking motivated students to improve academically,

although lower-ranked students could develop negative attitudes toward learning. Similarly, Habimana (2021) reported that ranking encouraged academic discipline but could reduce confidence among students ranked lower. These findings suggest that the influence of ranking depends partly on how schools manage competition and provide encouragement and academic support to students across different performance levels.

Student Ranking Practices Create Excessive Pressure that Negatively Affects Students' Learning Outcomes

The findings show that 29 teachers (40.3%) agreed, 18 teachers (25.0%) were neutral, and 25 teachers (34.7%) disagreed that student ranking practices create excessive pressure that negatively affects students' learning outcomes. The responses were more divided compared with the other statements. This suggests that while some teachers perceive ranking as a source of academic pressure, others do not consider the pressure sufficiently significant to affect students' learning outcomes negatively. The interview findings generally revealed that ranking has both motivational and discouraging effects depending on students' academic performance and experiences. Some interviewees indicated that ranking encourages students to improve, while others emphasized that students who repeatedly occupy lower positions may become discouraged and lose confidence. One of the interviewees said that,

> *"Students who consistently rank low may become discouraged, lose confidence, and participate less actively in learning. Therefore, while student ranking can enhance educational standards by promoting competition and accountability, it should be accompanied by guidance, counselling, and support to ensure that all students remain motivated to improve regardless of their academic ability".* (Interviewee H_3, July 2026)

The finding demonstrates that an excessive emphasis on examination positions may undermine students' confidence, motivation, and classroom participation, particularly among consistently low-ranked students. Therefore, ranking should be accompanied by guidance and counselling, academic support, and encouragement so that students view ranking as an opportunity for improvement rather than as a basis for negative self-evaluation. The finding is supported by Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), which posits that individuals evaluate their abilities by comparing themselves with others. Continuous unfavourable comparison may result in negative self-evaluation and reduced motivation. Empirically, Jennings and Pallas (2021) found that low-performing students experienced anxiety and reduced classroom participation, while Hurrelmann (2022)

reported that excessive ranking increased fear of failure among low-ranked students. Similarly, Orina (2024) found that examination-based ranking could contribute to anxiety and unhealthy rivalry among learners.

Students' Responses on the Effects of Student Ranking Practices on Academic Performance

Students were also involved in the study because they are directly affected by student ranking practices in schools. Their responses helped the researcher to understand how ranking practices influence their academic performance, motivation to learn, classroom participation, and overall educational experiences. The students' responses regarding the effects of student ranking practices on educational standards are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.
Students' Responses on the Effects of Student Examination Ranking Practices on Academic Performance (n=98)

Statement	Disagree		Neutral		Agree	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
Student ranking practices motivate students to improve their academic performance.	10	10.2	8	8.2	80	81.6
Examination-based student ranking encourages healthy academic competition among students.	3	3.1	8	8.2	87	88.8
Student ranking practices help improve students' academic performance at my school.	26	26.5	17	17.3	55	56.1
Student ranking practices help students to become more committed to their studies.	6	6.1	11	11.2	81	82.7
Student ranking practices create pressure that negatively affects some students' academic performance.	44	44.9	23	23.5	31	31.6

Source: Field Data (2026)

Table 4.5 presents students' responses concerning the effects of student examination ranking practices on academic performance. The findings are presented under three response categories: Disagree, Neutral, and Agree, with frequencies (F) and percentages (%), as follows.

Student Ranking Practices Motivate Students to Improve Their Academic Performance

The findings show that 80 students (81.6%) agreed, 8 students (8.2%) were neutral, and 10 students (10.2%) disagreed that student ranking practices motivate students to improve their academic performance. This indicates that the majority of students perceive ranking as a motivational practice that encourages them to work harder and improve their academic results. The finding is consistent with Jennings and Pallas (2021), who found that examination-based student positioning increased academic competition and encouraged high-performing students to improve their examination performance. Similarly, Asare (2023) reported that examination ranking motivated students to increase their academic effort and contributed to

improved school performance. Zhang (2023) also found that examination-based positioning strengthened students' commitment to academic work and enhanced academic performance. These studies support the view that ranking can motivate students to work harder and strive for improved academic achievement.

Examination-Based Student Ranking Encourages Healthy Academic Competition Among Students

The results indicate that 87 students (88.8%) agreed, 8 students (8.2%) were neutral, and 3 students (3.1%) disagreed that examination-based student ranking encourages healthy academic competition. This represents the highest level of agreement among the statements in Table 4.5. The finding suggests that students largely perceive ranking as a mechanism that encourages them to compete academically and strive for better examination positions. The finding was supported by WEO D (July 2026), which stated:

> *"Ranking promotes healthy competition among schools. For example, a school that performs poorly may be encouraged to identify and adopt effective strategies from higher-performing schools to improve its academic performance and achieve a better position in future rankings* (Interviewee D, July 2026).

The finding implies that examination ranking can promote constructive competition and continuous improvement by encouraging students and schools to identify weaknesses, learn from better performers, and increase their academic efforts. When properly managed, such competition can contribute to improved academic performance and educational standards.

The finding is supported by Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), which posits that individuals evaluate their abilities and performance by comparing themselves with others. Such comparisons can motivate individuals to improve when they perceive higher-performing peers as achievable reference points. Empirically, Forsberg (2020) found that academic ranking motivated students to improve academically, while Asare (2023) reported that examination ranking encouraged academic competition and enhanced school performance. Orina (2024) similarly found that examination-based ranking increased academic competition and examination performance among learners.

Student Ranking Practices Contribute to Improving Students' Academic Performance

The findings show that 55 students (56.1%) agreed, 17 (17.3%) were neutral, and 26 (26.5%) disagreed that student ranking practices

contribute to improving students' academic performance at their school. Although more than half of the students agreed, the relatively high proportion of disagreement suggests that many students are uncertain about whether ranking directly improves the overall educational standards of their schools. The finding is supported by Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), which explains that individuals evaluate their abilities and performance by comparing themselves with others. In this context, students and schools can use ranking positions as reference points to identify performance differences and strive for improvement. The theory, therefore, helps explain how ranking can stimulate academic effort and contribute indirectly to improved educational standards.

Empirically, the finding is consistent with Hurrelmann (2022), who found that examination-based positioning promoted academic seriousness and accountability. Zhang (2023) reported that examination positioning improved students' commitment to academic work and school performance, while Orina (2024) found that ranking improved academic competition and examination performance. These findings support the argument that ranking can contribute to educational improvement when implemented fairly and accompanied by supportive educational practices.

Student Ranking Practices Help Students Become More Committed to Their Studies

The results indicate that 81 students (82.7%) agreed, 11 students (11.2%) were neutral, and 6 students (6.1%) disagreed that student ranking practices help students become more committed to their studies. This high level of agreement suggests that ranking encourages students to devote more effort and attention to their academic work to improve or maintain their examination positions. The finding was supported by one of the interviewees who revealed that,

> *"Students' ranking influences academic performance in schools in both positive and negative ways. On the positive side, it helps identify high-performing and low-performing students, enabling teachers to provide appropriate academic support where needed. In addition, the ranking positions promote healthy academic competition among students, motivating them to work harder and improve their performance".* (Interviewee H_4, July 2026).

The finding indicates that examination ranking can strengthen students' academic commitment, effort, and concentration on their studies by providing clear performance targets. When students recognize that improved effort can lead to better positions, they may become more committed to regular study and academic activities. However, schools

should ensure that commitment is encouraged through positive motivation rather than excessive pressure.

The finding is supported by Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), which suggests that individuals compare their performance with others to evaluate their abilities and determine areas for improvement. Students may therefore use their examination positions as reference points and increase their effort to attain better positions. Empirically, Zhang (2023) found that examination-based positioning increased students' commitment to academic work and improved school performance. Similarly, Asare (2023) reported that examination ranking motivated students to improve academically, while Orina (2024) found that ranking enhanced academic competition and examination performance.

Student Ranking Practices Create Pressure that Negatively Affects Some Students Academically

The findings show that 31 students (31.6%) agreed, 23 students (23.5%) were neutral, and 44 students (44.9%) disagreed that student ranking practices create pressure that negatively affects some students academically. The results indicate that the majority of students did not perceive ranking as creating significant academic pressure. However, the 31.6% who agreed demonstrate that a notable proportion of students experience some negative pressure associated with ranking. The finding is supported by Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), which posits that individuals evaluate their abilities by comparing themselves with others. Repeated unfavourable comparisons may result in negative self-evaluation and reduced motivation. Empirically, Jennings and Pallas (2021) found that low-performing students experienced anxiety and reduced classroom participation associated with examination positioning. Hurrelmann (2022) similarly reported that excessive ranking increased fear of failure among low-ranked students, while Orina (2024) found that examination-based ranking could contribute to anxiety and unhealthy rivalry among learners.

Students were given open-ended questions about the effects of student ranking practices on academic performance and suggestions for improving their use in schools. Their responses indicated that student ranking practices generally motivate learners to work harder and improve their academic performance. Students explained that ranking helps them understand their academic position and identify areas requiring improvement. However, some students noted that consistently low-performing learners may become discouraged or embarrassed, or lose confidence. Therefore, students perceived ranking as beneficial when it is used to encourage academic improvement

rather than to shame or discourage low-performing learners.

The finding is supported by Reay (2020), who found that ranking practices can promote academic competition and accountability, although low-performing students may experience discouragement. Similarly, Springer and Gardner (2021) reported that performance-based recognition improved academic motivation and examination performance but could create pressure when excessive emphasis was placed on examination results. The finding is also supported by Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), which posits that students compare their performance with peers', motivating some to improve while potentially discouraging those who consistently compare unfavorably.

Furthermore, students suggested that ranking should be conducted fairly and transparently, and used primarily to motivate learners to improve their academic performance. They recommended that schools avoid publicly embarrassing students who achieve low positions and instead provide guidance, counselling, remedial support, and encouragement. Students also suggested that schools should recognize individual improvement and effort in addition to rewarding students who obtain the highest examination positions.

These suggestions are supported by Namusisi (2024), who recommended strengthening learner-support programmes alongside academic reward systems, as students who do not receive recognition may become discouraged. Cruz (2022) similarly recommended balancing academic rewards with character and skills development. From the perspective of Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), the suggestions are appropriate because students can use the performance of high-achieving peers as a positive reference for improvement when comparison is managed constructively.

Nonetheless, teachers recommended that student ranking should be implemented transparently and fairly, with greater emphasis on motivating students and improving academic performance rather than labelling or punishing low-performing learners. They suggested that schools should provide academic support, guidance and counselling, and remedial teaching to students who perform poorly. Teachers also recommended recognizing students' progress and individual improvement, rather than concentrating only on final examination positions.

The teachers' recommendations are consistent with Sahlberg (2021), who emphasized equal learning opportunities and cautioned against excessive emphasis on competitive assessment practices. Molefe (2022) also recommended balancing examination ranking with continuous assessment approaches to reduce

pressure and support broader educational development. The recommendations are further explained by Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), since constructive comparison with high-performing peers can encourage students to increase their effort and improve their academic achievement.

Generally, there is a general agreement between teachers and students regarding the effects of student ranking practices on academic performance. Both groups reported that ranking motivates students to work harder, increases commitment to studies, and encourages academic competition. For example, 87.5% of teachers and 81.6% of students agreed that ranking motivates students to improve their academic performance, while 73.6% of teachers and 88.8% of students agreed that ranking encourages healthy academic competition. This agreement may be explained by the fact that ranking provides students with a visible reference point against which they can compare their academic performance, set performance targets, and increase their learning effort. The finding is consistent with Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), which explains that individuals evaluate their abilities and performance through comparison with others. Similarly, Jennings and Pallas (2021), Asare (2023), and Zhang (2023) reported that examination ranking or positioning can encourage academic competition, commitment, and improved performance. However, the two groups differed somewhat regarding the negative effects of ranking: 40.3% of teachers agreed that ranking creates excessive pressure that negatively affects learning outcomes, compared with only 31.6% of students. This difference may reflect teachers' broader observation of students' emotional and academic responses over time, whereas students may experience ranking more directly as a source of motivation. Nevertheless, both groups recognized that ranking can have both positive and negative effects, depending on how it is implemented and supported.

CONCLUSION

The findings conclude that student examination ranking practices have both positive and negative effects on academic performance in public secondary schools in Musoma Municipal. Overall, teachers and students largely agreed that ranking motivates learners to work harder, encourages healthy academic competition, helps teachers monitor academic progress and identify students requiring support, and strengthens students' commitment to their studies. However, the findings also show that ranking may create pressure, discourage consistently low-performing students, and reduce confidence when it is excessively emphasized. Therefore, student ranking can contribute to improved educational standards when it is used

constructively as a means of motivation, performance monitoring, and academic improvement rather than as a basis for labelling, humiliating, or discouraging learners.

Recommendations

Schools in Musoma Municipal should use student examination ranking as a supportive academic improvement strategy rather than focusing only on students' final positions. School heads and teachers should provide guidance and counselling, remedial teaching, and individual academic support to consistently low-performing students, while recognizing students' improvement and effort alongside high examination positions. Teachers should also ensure that ranking is conducted fairly and transparently and avoid publicly embarrassing or labelling low-ranked students. The Municipal Education Office should guide schools in balancing examination ranking with continuous assessment, learner-centred teaching, and other forms of recognition to maintain healthy competition while reducing unnecessary academic pressure.

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