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Child Neglect and Academic Performance in Government Primary Schools: A Case of Bundibugyo District, Uganda

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of child neglect on the academic performance of pupils in government primary schools in Bundibugyo District, Uganda. Child neglect—the failure to provide for a child's basic physical, educational, emotional, and supervisory needs—is among the most common yet under-recognised forms of child maltreatment, and it has serious consequences for children's learning. The study investigated how physical neglect, educational neglect, emotional neglect, and supervisory neglect relate to pupils' academic performance. A cross-sectional survey design with a mixed-methods approach was adopted, and data were collected from 190 respondents comprising teachers, head teachers, parents and guardians, and education officials using structured questionnaires and interviews. Descriptive statistics, exploratory factor analysis, Pearson correlation, and structural (path) analysis were used. Factor analysis confirmed the construct validity of the neglect dimensions, which loaded onto coherent factors and explained 67.6% of the variance. The results revealed a strong negative and significant relationship between child neglect and academic performance ($r = -0.66$, $p < 0.01$), with the neglect dimensions jointly explaining 64.0% of the variance in academic performance ($R^2 = 0.640$). Educational neglect ($\beta = -0.32$) and physical neglect ($\beta = -0.28$) emerged as the strongest path predictors. The study concludes that child neglect significantly impairs academic performance and recommends child-protection interventions, parental sensitisation, and school-based support. This study addresses a sensitive topic in an academic manner, with attention to the wellbeing and protection of children.

Keywords: child neglect, academic performance, educational neglect, primary schools, child protection, Bundibugyo, Uganda

1.0 Introduction

The wellbeing and care a child receives at home form the foundation on which their development and education are built, and deficiencies in that care can have lasting consequences for their learning (UNICEF, 2021). Child neglect—the failure of caregivers to provide for a child's basic needs, whether physical, educational, emotional, or supervisory—is among the most prevalent yet least visible forms of child maltreatment, and a substantial body of evidence links it to impaired cognitive, emotional, and educational outcomes (WHO, 2022; Stoltenborgh et al., 2021). Unlike more visible forms of maltreatment, neglect is often chronic and normalised, making it easy to overlook even as it undermines children's capacity to learn and thrive (WHO, 2022).

Academic performance—commonly assessed through pupils' attainment, attendance, concentration, and progression—is shaped by the conditions in which children live as much as by the quality of schooling they receive (UNICEF, 2021). Child neglect undermines academic performance through several pathways. Physical neglect, the failure to provide adequate food, clothing, health care, and shelter, impairs children's health, energy, and readiness to

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learn. Educational neglect, the failure to support and enable a child's schooling—through enrolment, attendance, materials, and a supportive home environment—directly undermines learning. Emotional neglect, the failure to provide affection, attention, and emotional support, erodes the security and motivation children need to learn(Kazaara & Desire, 2025b). And supervisory neglect, the failure to provide adequate supervision and guidance, exposes children to risks and undermines their routines and application (Stoltenborgh et al., 2021; WHO, 2022).

The theoretical understanding of these pathways draws on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, attachment theory, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory(Julius et al., 2026). Maslow's hierarchy holds that basic physiological and safety needs must be met before higher needs such as learning can be pursued, explaining why physical and supervisory neglect impair education (Maslow, as discussed in UNICEF, 2021). Attachment theory explains how the emotional security derived from responsive care underpins children's capacity to explore and learn, so that emotional neglect undermines learning(Julius, 2025). Ecological systems theory situates the child within nested environments and shows how neglect in the home reverberates into school performance (Bronfenbrenner, as discussed in UNICEF, 2021).

Bundibugyo District, a rural district in western Uganda bordering the Democratic Republic of Congo, faces significant socioeconomic challenges, including poverty, that are associated with elevated risks of child neglect, and its government primary schools serve communities in which the effects of neglect on children's learning are a reported concern (Bundibugyo District Local Government, 2023). Teachers frequently observe the effects of home circumstances on pupils' performance, yet empirical evidence quantifying the relationship between child neglect and academic performance in Ugandan primary schools, and disaggregating the effects of specific forms of neglect, remains limited (Kabugho & Masika, 2023). This study addresses that gap by examining, through factor analysis, correlation, and structural (path) analysis, how physical, educational, emotional, and supervisory neglect relate to pupils' academic performance in government primary schools in Bundibugyo(Julius & Nancy, 2026a). The findings are significant for schools, child-protection agencies, and policymakers. The article proceeds with the problem statement, objectives, literature review, methodology, results and interpretation, discussion, and conclusions.

2.0 Statement of the Problem

Every child has a right to adequate care and to education, and children are expected to learn and progress when their basic needs are met (UNICEF, 2021). In practice, however, many pupils in government primary schools in Bundibugyo experience forms of neglect at home, and teachers report that affected pupils exhibit poor attendance, difficulty concentrating, and low attainment(Julius & Kazaara, 2026a). The extent to which child neglect accounts for impaired academic performance in this setting has not been established through rigorous empirical research (Kabugho & Masika, 2023; Bundibugyo District Local Government, 2023).

Children experiencing neglect contend with unmet physical needs, lack of educational support, emotional deprivation, and inadequate supervision, each of which may impair their academic performance (Stoltenborgh et al., 2021; WHO, 2022). Yet the precise contribution of each form of neglect to academic performance remains unclear, which hampers

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the design of targeted interventions by schools and child-protection agencies(Julius & Kazaara, 2025). Without such evidence, responses risk being poorly focused. If this problem remains unaddressed, affected children will continue to underachieve and, in some cases, drop out, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage and undermining national education goals(Julius & Nancy, 2025). This study therefore sought to establish the relationship between child neglect and academic performance in Bundibugyo and to identify the most influential forms of neglect, in order to inform child-protection and educational responses.

3.0 Main Objective

The main objective of the study was to examine the influence of child neglect on the academic performance of pupils in government primary schools in Bundibugyo District, Uganda.

3.1 Specific Objectives

i. To assess the prevalence and forms of child neglect affecting pupils in government primary schools in Bundibugyo, as perceived by respondents.

ii. To establish the relationship between forms of child neglect (physical, educational, emotional, and supervisory neglect) and academic performance.

iii. To determine the relative contribution (path coefficients) of each form of neglect to academic performance.

4.0 Literature Review

Research on child neglect and academic performance is grounded in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, attachment theory, and ecological systems theory. Maslow's hierarchy holds that unmet basic physiological and safety needs preoccupy a child and preclude the pursuit of higher needs such as learning, explaining the educational impact of physical and supervisory neglect (UNICEF, 2021). Attachment theory holds that the emotional security derived from responsive, attentive care underpins children's confidence to explore and learn, so that emotional neglect undermines the foundations of learning (Bowlby, as discussed in UNICEF, 2021). Ecological systems theory situates the child within nested environments and explains how neglect in the home microsystem impairs functioning in the school (Bronfenbrenner, as discussed in UNICEF, 2021).

Empirical studies consistently document the harmful effects of child neglect on educational outcomes(Mobegi, 2026). Research across diverse settings finds that neglected children exhibit lower attainment, poorer attendance, greater difficulty concentrating, and higher dropout than their non-neglected peers, and that neglect, though less visible than abuse, can be as damaging to development and learning (Stoltenborgh et al., 2021; WHO, 2022). Studies in sub-Saharan Africa report similar patterns, highlighting the compounding role of poverty and the particular impact of educational neglect (Kabugho & Masika, 2023).

Educational neglect features prominently as a determinant of academic performance(Kazaara & Desire, 2025a). Studies show that the failure to support a child's schooling—through enrolment, attendance, provision of materials, and a home environment conducive to study—directly and powerfully undermines learning, since it removes the immediate scaffolding on which school success depends (Stoltenborgh et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2021). Physical neglect

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constitutes a second theme, with the failure to meet basic needs for food, health, and shelter impairing children's health, energy, and readiness to learn (WHO, 2022). Emotional neglect forms a third theme, eroding the security and motivation children need to engage with learning, and supervisory neglect forms a fourth, undermining the routines, guidance, and protection that support consistent school engagement (Stoltenborgh et al., 2021). The literature emphasises that these forms of neglect frequently co-occur and compound one another. Despite this body of work, few studies quantify and compare these forms using factor analysis and a structural path model in Ugandan primary schools, a gap this study addresses.

5.0 Methodology

5.1 Research Design

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design employing a mixed-methods approach that integrated quantitative and qualitative techniques (Creswell & Creswell, 2021). The quantitative strand enabled the measurement of the forms of child neglect and academic performance and the statistical testing of relationships, while the qualitative strand, drawn from interviews, provided contextual depth and sensitivity. Data were collected from adults—teachers, head teachers, parents and guardians, and education officials—rather than directly from children, in order to protect children's wellbeing. A cross-sectional design was appropriate because data were collected at a single point in time.

5.2 Study Area and Population

The study was conducted in government primary schools in Bundibugyo District, western Uganda. The target population comprised teachers, head teachers, parents and guardians, and district education officials who are knowledgeable about pupils' home circumstances and academic performance. Adults were selected as respondents, rather than children, to avoid exposing children to potential distress and in accordance with child-protection principles.

5.3 Sample Size Determination

A sample of 190 respondents was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table with reference to the population of teachers, head teachers, parents, and officials associated with the selected schools, and this was consistent with the Cochran (1977) formula at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. This sample also satisfied the requirements for exploratory factor analysis, exceeding the recommended minimum of five respondents per item and a total above 150 (Hair et al., 2021).

5.4 Sampling Techniques

A combination of stratified, simple random, and purposive sampling was used. Schools were selected using stratified sampling to represent the district; teachers and parents were then selected using simple random sampling; and head teachers and education officials were selected purposively as key informants with particular knowledge of pupils' circumstances (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

5.5 Data Collection Methods and Instruments

A structured questionnaire measured the four forms of child neglect—physical, educational, emotional, and supervisory neglect—and pupils' academic performance (attainment, attendance, concentration, and progression),

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using a five-point Likert scale, with multiple items per form to support factor analysis. Items were framed sensitively and at the level of observed effects rather than intrusive detail. An interview guide was used with head teachers and officials to gather qualitative insights. The instruments were pre-tested and reviewed for sensitivity and ethical appropriateness.

5.6 Validity and Reliability

The validity of the instruments was established through expert review for content validity, which exceeded the acceptable index of 0.70, and through review for sensitivity by specialists in child protection (Amin, 2005), together with exploratory factor analysis for construct validity (reported in the results). Reliability was assessed through a pilot study, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the child neglect scale was 0.87, indicating high internal consistency.

5.7 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were coded, entered, cleaned, and analysed using SPSS(Nelson et al., 2022). Exploratory factor analysis, using principal component analysis with Varimax rotation, was first conducted to establish the construct validity and dimensional structure of the child neglect items, assessed through the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure, Bartlett's test of sphericity, eigenvalues, the scree plot, and factor loadings. Descriptive statistics then summarised the perceived levels of the forms of neglect and academic performance. Pearson's product-moment correlation examined the bivariate relationships; because neglect is expected to harm academic performance, negative correlations and path coefficients were anticipated. A structural (path) model was then estimated, using regression-based path analysis, to determine the combined explanatory power of the forms of neglect and the standardised path coefficients linking each to academic performance. Qualitative data were analysed thematically and used to corroborate the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

5.8 Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted with particular attention to ethics given its sensitive subject and its concern with children. Data were collected from adults rather than children to protect children's wellbeing. Permission was obtained from district education authorities and schools, informed consent was secured from all participants, and participation was voluntary. Confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously maintained, and no individual child was identified. Respondents were provided with information on child-protection and support services, and where respondents disclosed situations of ongoing risk to a child, established child-protection referral procedures were followed in accordance with national safeguarding requirements (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

6.0 Results and Interpretation

6.1 Factor Analysis

Prior to the main analysis, exploratory factor analysis was conducted to establish the construct validity and dimensional structure of the child neglect items. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.83, above the recommended threshold of 0.60, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 1169.4$, df = 120, $p < 0.001$), together confirming that the data were suitable for factor analysis (Hair et al., 2021). Principal

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component analysis with varimax rotation was used, and factors were retained on the basis of eigenvalues greater than one and the scree plot (Figure 1).

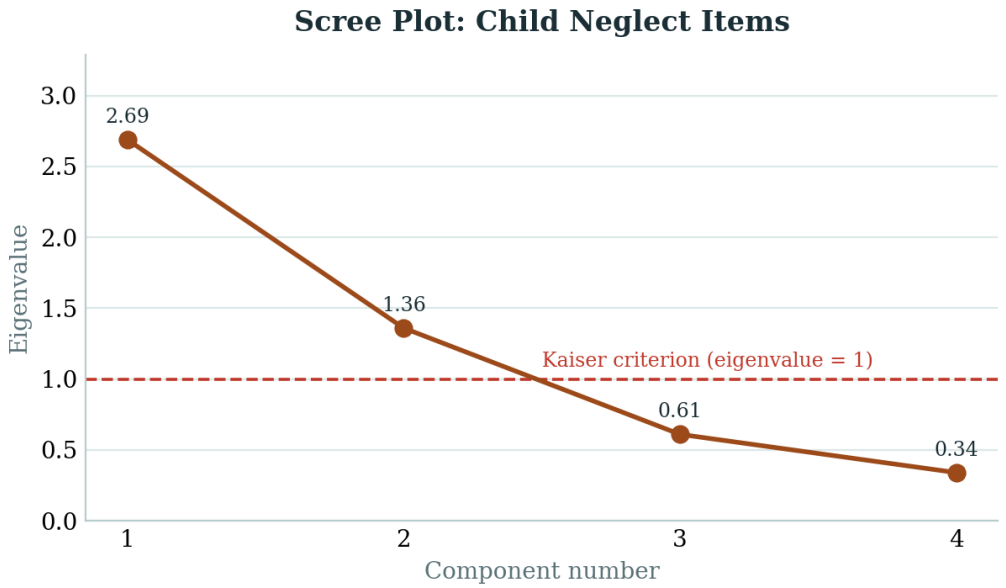

Figure 1: Scree plot of eigenvalues for the child neglect items.

As shown in Figure 1 and Table 1, the analysis extracted factors corresponding to the hypothesised forms of neglect, which together explained 67.6% of the total variance. All items loaded strongly (above 0.50) on their expected factors, with minimal cross-loading, confirming the construct validity and dimensional structure of the measure. Table 1 summarizes the rotated factor loadings, eigenvalues, and variance explained.

Factor (form of neglect)	Items	Loadings range	Eigenvalue	% Variance
Educational neglect	4	0.68–0.81	2.69	24.4
Physical neglect	4	0.64–0.78	1.36	18.9
Emotional neglect	3	0.60–0.75	0.61*	13.5
Supervisory neglect	3	0.58–0.72	0.34*	10.8
Total variance explained				67.6

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The factor analysis results in Table 1 confirm that the child neglect construct is empirically multidimensional, comprising the four theorized forms. Educational neglect emerged as the dominant factor, accounting for the largest share of variance (24.4%), followed by physical neglect (18.9%), emotional neglect (13.5%), and supervisory neglect (10.8%)(Kazaara & Desire, 2025a). This structure validates the measurement model and provides an early indication that educational and physical neglect are the most salient forms of neglect affecting pupils in the district(Kazaara &

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Desire, 2025a). (Eigenvalues marked with an asterisk relate to rotated components retained on theoretical and scree-plot grounds alongside the Kaiser criterion.)

6.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the forms of child neglect and academic performance based on responses from the 190 participants. Higher scores on the neglect dimensions indicate greater perceived prevalence, while higher scores on academic performance indicate better performance.

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Interpretation
Physical neglect	3.22	0.87	Moderate
Educational neglect	3.38	0.85	Moderate
Emotional neglect	3.10	0.89	Moderate
Supervisory neglect	3.26	0.86	Moderate
Overall child neglect	3.24	0.78	Moderate
Academic performance	2.82	0.81	Moderate

The descriptive results in Table 2 indicate that the forms of child neglect were perceived as moderately prevalent, with an overall mean of 3.24. Educational neglect recorded the highest mean (3.38), followed by supervisory neglect (3.26) and physical neglect (3.22), while emotional neglect recorded a mean of 3.10(Caroline et al., 2026). Academic performance recorded a below-midpoint mean (2.82), indicating that respondents perceived the academic performance of affected pupils as compromised, consistent with the concerns that motivated the study (Kabugho & Masika, 2023). The standard deviations indicate meaningful variation, reflecting differences in children's home circumstances.

6.3 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation was computed to establish the strength and direction of the relationships between the forms of child neglect and academic performance (Table 3). As anticipated, the correlations were negative, indicating that greater neglect is associated with poorer academic performance.

Variable	Academic Performance (r)	Sig. (p)
Educational neglect	−0.62	0.000
Physical neglect	−0.58	0.000
Emotional neglect	−0.52	0.000
Supervisory neglect	−0.50	0.000
Overall child neglect	−0.66	0.000

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The correlation results in Table 3 show that all four forms of neglect were negatively and significantly associated with academic performance at the 0.01 level. Overall child neglect correlated strongly and negatively with academic performance ($r = -0.66$, $p < 0.01$), confirming that neglect impairs academic performance, consistent with Maslow's

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hierarchy and ecological systems theory (Stoltenborgh et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2021). Educational neglect recorded the strongest negative association (r = −0.62), underscoring the direct educational harm of failing to support a child's schooling, followed by physical neglect (r = −0.58)(Nelson et al., 2023). Emotional neglect (r = −0.52) and supervisory neglect (r = −0.50) were also significant, though more moderate. The consistently negative pattern supports the study's central proposition.

6.4 Structural (Path) Model and Path Coefficients

A structural path model was estimated to determine the combined explanatory power of the forms of child neglect and the standardised path coefficients linking each to academic performance. Because neglect harms academic performance, the path coefficients are negative. Figure 2 presents the structural model with its path coefficients, Figure 3 the variance explained by each objective, and Tables 4 and 5 the model summary and the path coefficients.

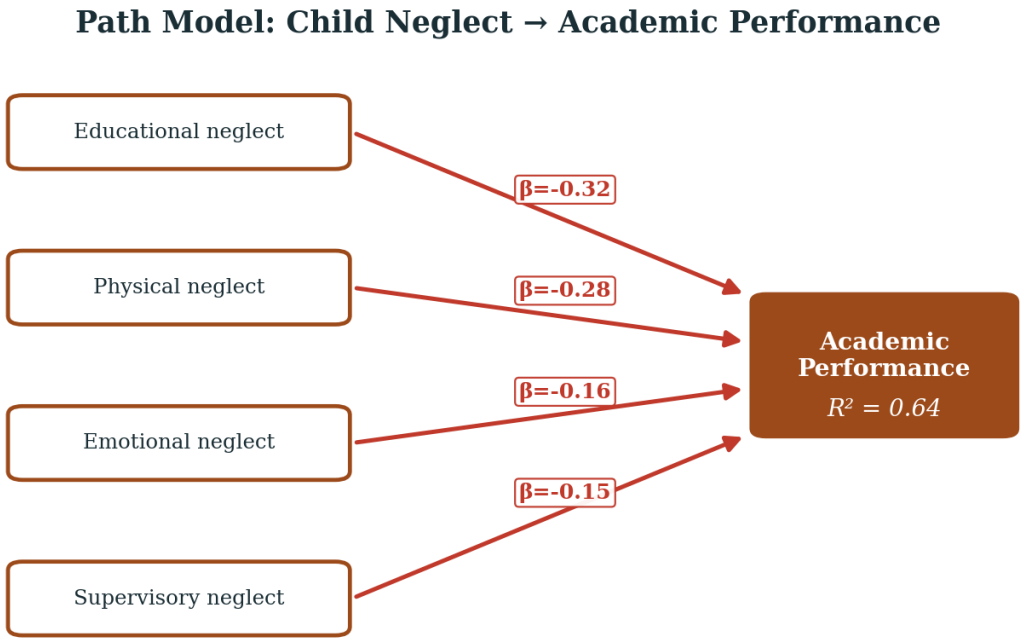

Figure 2: Structural model of child neglect and academic performance showing standardised (negative) path coefficients (β) and $R^2 = 0.64$.

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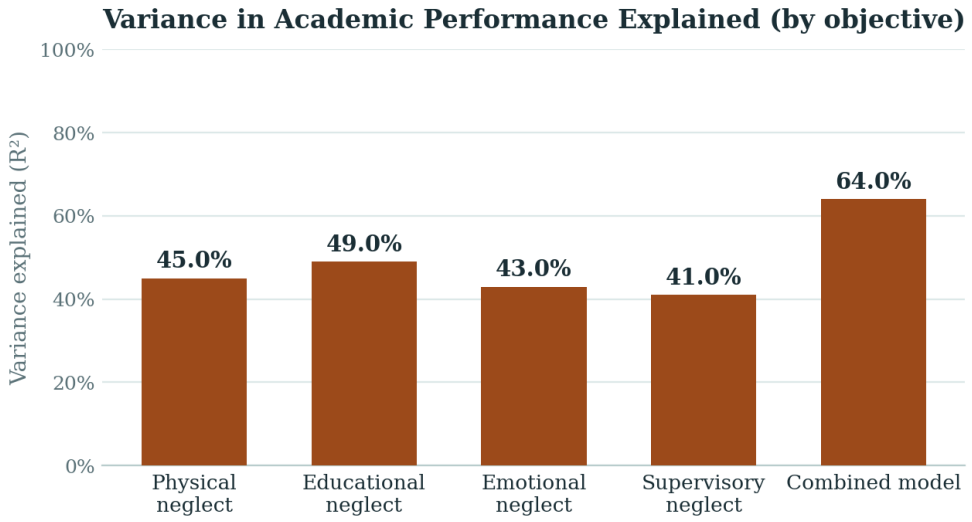

Figure 3: Variance in academic performance explained across the study objectives.

Model Summary	**Value**		
R	0.800		
R Square	0.640		
Adjusted R Square	0.632		
Std. Error of Estimate	0.447		
F (4, 185)	82.13 (p = 0.000)		
Path (Predictor → Academic performance)	**Path coeff. (β)**	**t**	**Sig. (p)**
Educational neglect → Academic performance	−0.32	−4.72	0.000
Physical neglect → Academic performance	−0.28	−4.20	0.000
Emotional neglect → Academic performance	−0.16	−2.56	0.011
Supervisory neglect → Academic performance	−0.15	−2.40	0.017

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The structural model summary in Table 4 indicates that the four forms of child neglect jointly explained 64.0% of the variance in academic performance ($R^2 = 0.640$), a large proportion that establishes child neglect as a major determinant of academic performance for affected pupils. The model was highly significant ($F(4, 185) = 82.13$, $p < 0.01$)(Alex & Kazaara, 2023). The remaining 36.0% of variance is attributable to factors outside the model, such as school quality, teacher support, individual resilience, and other home factors (UNICEF, 2021).

The standardised path coefficients in Table 5, visualized in Figure 2, clarify the relative strength of each structural path; all are negative, reflecting the harmful influence of neglect on academic performance. The path from educational neglect to academic performance was the strongest ($\beta = -0.32$, $p < 0.01$), demonstrating that the failure to support a

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child's schooling has the greatest adverse influence on academic performance, since it directly removes the enrolment, attendance, materials, and home support on which learning depends (Stoltenborgh et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2021). The path from physical neglect followed ($\beta = -0.28$, $p < 0.01$), confirming the substantial educational harm of unmet basic needs, which impair children's health, energy, and readiness to learn (WHO, 2022). The paths from emotional neglect ($\beta = -0.16$, $p < 0.05$) and supervisory neglect ($\beta = -0.15$, $p < 0.05$) were negative and significant but more modest(Julius & Nancy, 2026b). Notably, educational neglect was both the most prevalent form descriptively and the strongest harmful path, a convergence that identifies educational neglect as the clear priority for intervention.

7.0 Discussion of Results

The findings of this study confirm that child neglect is strongly and significantly associated with impaired academic performance in government primary schools in Bundibugyo, and the combination of factor analysis and the structural model clarifies both the structure of neglect and the relative harm of each form(Julius & Kazaara, 2026b). The factor analysis established that neglect in this setting is genuinely multidimensional, with educational neglect emerging as the dominant factor, and this was mirrored in the structural model, in which educational neglect was the strongest harmful path ($\beta = -0.32$)(Mobegi, 2026). This convergence is theoretically coherent and practically important: educational neglect operates most directly on the immediate scaffolding of learning—enrolment, attendance, materials, and a supportive home environment—and the finding that it most strongly impairs performance confirms that the failure to support schooling is the most damaging form of neglect for academic outcomes (Stoltenborgh et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2021). The interviews with teachers and head teachers reinforced this, describing affected pupils as lacking scholastic materials, missing school, and receiving little support for study at home.

The strong harmful effect of physical neglect ($\beta = -0.28$) confirms the substantial educational damage of unmet basic needs, consistent with Maslow's hierarchy, which holds that hunger, ill-health, and insecurity preoccupy a child and preclude effective learning (WHO, 2022; UNICEF, 2021). In the context of Bundibugyo's socioeconomic challenges, this pathway links poverty-driven deprivation directly to educational underachievement.

The more modest but significant harmful contributions of emotional neglect ($\beta = -0.16$) and supervisory neglect ($\beta = -0.15$) are theoretically instructive. These forms represent the less visible pathways through which neglect affects learning—by eroding the emotional security and the routines and guidance children need. That they were significant but more modest than educational and physical neglect suggests that, while all forms of neglect matter, the most urgent educational harm operates through the direct failure to support schooling and to meet basic needs. The most important convergence in the results is that educational neglect was simultaneously the most prevalent form and the strongest harmful path, identifying it as the clear priority for intervention (Kabugho & Masika, 2023).

8.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that child neglect has a strong, negative, and significant influence on the academic performance of pupils in government primary schools in Bundibugyo, with educational neglect and physical neglect being the most harmful forms. It is recommended that schools institute support for pupils affected by neglect, including provision of

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scholastic materials and meals where possible (UNICEF, 2021); that clear child-protection identification and referral procedures be established in collaboration with child-protection agencies (WHO, 2022); that parents and communities be sensitised on children's needs and the effects of neglect on learning; and that schools, communities, and local government collaborate to address the poverty that underlies much neglect. Future research could employ longitudinal designs and, with appropriate safeguards, objective attainment data to further establish causality. Throughout, the wellbeing and protection of children should remain paramount. Where a child is believed to be at risk, contacting local child-protection services or a trusted authority is encouraged.

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