

The effect of child neglect on the academic performance of learners: A case of selected primary schools in Mkoba of Gweru, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Globally, child neglect remained a significant social and educational challenge with serious implications for learners' psychological well-being and academic performance. In Zimbabwe, particularly in high-density urban areas, child neglect continued to undermine educational outcomes, necessitating empirical investigation. This study examined the effects of child neglect on the academic performance of learners in public primary schools in Mkoba, Zimbabwe. The study was guided by three objectives: to identify common forms of child neglect experienced by learners, to assess its effects on academic performance, and to evaluate existing school-based, parental, community, and policy interventions. A descriptive mixed-methods research design was adopted. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews from a sample of 120 participants; learners, teachers, head teachers and parents/guardians. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and regression analysis (SPSS Version 25), while qualitative data were analysed thematically. Findings revealed that educational neglect was the most prevalent form, particularly lack of learning materials ($M = 3.72$) and inadequate homework support ($M = 3.58$), followed by physical and emotional neglect. Regression analysis indicated that child neglect significantly predicted academic performance ($R^2 = 0.620$, $F = 20.42$, $p < 0.001$), with educational neglect exerting the strongest negative effect ($\beta = -0.442$), followed by emotional ($\beta = -0.398$) and physical ($\beta = -0.312$). Qualitative results confirmed that neglect contributed to poor concentration, low academic achievement, absenteeism, and psychological distress. The study concluded that child neglect significantly impaired academic performance, while existing support systems remained fragmented and inadequate. The study therefore recommended strengthened child protection policies, improved school-based support services, and enhanced multi-sectoral collaboration.

Keywords: Academic Performance; Child neglect; Learners; Psychological Effect and Resilience

1. Introduction

Academic performance is widely recognized as a key indicator of educational success and learner development, reflecting the extent to which learners achieve expected educational outcomes in schools. However, academic achievement is influenced by numerous factors operating both within and outside the school environment, including family circumstances, socio-economic conditions, and psychological well-being (Chanda, 2023). Among these factors, child neglect has emerged as a significant concern due to its detrimental effects on learners' cognitive, emotional, and social development. Learners who experience neglect often face challenges such as inadequate educational support, poor nutrition, emotional deprivation, and unstable home environments, all of which can hinder their ability to participate effectively in learning and achieve their full academic potential (UNICEF, 2021; WHO, 2020). Research has consistently shown that neglected children are more likely to experience poor academic outcomes compared to their non-neglected peers (Makusha & Richter, 2020; Gilbert et al., 2009).

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The effects of child neglect extend beyond academic challenges and frequently manifest in adverse psychological outcomes, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and emotional distress, which further compromise learners' ability to concentrate, retain information, and engage positively in classroom activities (Norman et al., 2012; Stoltenborgh et al., 2015). Despite these challenges, some learners demonstrate resilience, which enables them to adapt positively and maintain satisfactory academic performance despite experiencing adverse circumstances. Resilience is strengthened through protective factors such as supportive teachers, positive peer relationships, effective counselling services, and nurturing school environments (Masten, 2018; Werner, 2013). Therefore, understanding the interrelationship between academic performance, child neglect, learners' experiences, psychological effects, and resilience is essential for developing evidence-based interventions aimed at improving learner well-being and educational outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; UNICEF, 2021).

Academic performance has consistently remained a central indicator of educational effectiveness, as it reflects the extent to which learners successfully achieve intended learning outcomes within formal education systems. It is commonly assessed through examinations, continuous assessments, standardized testing, and classroom participation, which together provide a comprehensive measure of learners' cognitive development, knowledge acquisition, and skill application (Chanda & Chisebe, 2023). However, contemporary perspectives increasingly view academic performance as a multidimensional outcome that extends beyond classroom instruction, being influenced by a combination of school-based and external factors such as teaching quality, availability of learning resources, school leadership, and assessment practices, as well as broader socio-economic and environmental conditions. In many developing countries, academic performance is therefore understood as being significantly shaped by learners' home environments, socio-economic status, and psychosocial well-being, which often interact to either enhance or hinder educational achievement. Factors such as poverty, limited access to learning materials, inadequate nutrition, and unstable home environments reduce learners' capacity to concentrate and fully engage in academic activities, while family instability, including parental separation or lack of involvement, further weakens academic motivation and support systems (CDC, 2016). Psychosocial challenges such as stress, anxiety, and low self-esteem also negatively affect learners' classroom participation and overall performance. In Zimbabwe, for example, persistent disparities in academic achievement have been strongly associated with socio-economic inequalities, where learners from disadvantaged backgrounds face challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, insufficient study support at home, and limited access to educational resources, all of which contribute to underperformance. According to UNICEF (2021), children living in vulnerable households are more likely to experience learning disruptions that negatively affect their academic progress, while the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education Zimbabwe (MoPSE, 2022) further emphasized that structural inequalities within communities continue to widen achievement gaps among learners, highlighting the need for integrated interventions that address both school-based and home-based determinants of academic performance.

Child neglect refers to the persistent failure of caregivers to meet a child's basic physical, emotional, educational, and psychological needs, which are essential for healthy development and effective learning (Chanda et al., 2023). It is one of the most common forms of child maltreatment and often results from poverty, caregiver stress, low parental education, or lack of awareness of child development needs. Neglected children frequently experience inadequate nutrition, lack of learning materials, poor supervision, and limited emotional support, all of which negatively affect school readiness and classroom participation. According to WHO (2020), child neglect increases the risk of developmental delays and long-term cognitive and emotional difficulties, particularly during early childhood. In educational settings, this often leads to poor attendance, low concentration, behavioural problems, and reduced motivation to learn. Over time, these challenges contribute to persistent underachievement and higher dropout rates, especially in low-income contexts. Research also shows that child neglect is strongly associated with lower academic performance and reduced educational attainment (Makusha & Richter, 2020).

Learners who experience child neglect are particularly vulnerable within the education system because their home environments often fail to provide the emotional, physical, and academic support necessary for effective learning and consistent school engagement (Chanda, 2023b). This lack of support means that many of these learners arrive at school without adequate preparation, including insufficient learning materials, poor nutrition, and limited emotional stability, all of which are essential for concentration, participation, and retention of knowledge. As a result, they frequently demonstrate irregular attendance, poor concentration in class, and low levels of engagement in learning activities, which collectively hinder their academic progress and overall performance. In many school settings, teachers often become the primary source of academic and emotional support for these learners; however, overcrowded classrooms, limited counselling services, and insufficient institutional resources make it difficult to fully address their complex needs. According to UNESCO (2021), learners from neglectful home environments are more likely to experience persistent learning gaps that widen over time if early intervention strategies are not implemented. Furthermore, research shows that these learners face higher risks of underachievement, behavioural difficulties, and school dropout compared to their peers who receive adequate family support, as highlighted by Chirisa et al. (2022), who emphasize

that the cumulative effects of neglect significantly undermine both academic performance and long-term educational attainment.

The psychological effects of child neglect on learners are profound and often long-lasting, significantly influencing their emotional well-being and academic performance (Mponela & Chanda, 2025). Learners who experience neglect are more likely to develop anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, emotional instability, and chronic stress, all of which negatively affect attention span, memory retention, and overall cognitive functioning. Emotional neglect also disrupts social development, leading to isolation, withdrawal, and difficulties in forming positive relationships with peers and teachers, which further reduces classroom participation and engagement. In Zambia, studies have shown that vulnerable learners facing inadequate home support are more prone to psychosocial distress, which directly contributes to poor academic outcomes and school disengagement (MoE, 2022; ZSA, 2021). According to the UNICEF (2021), psychological distress resulting from neglect is a key predictor of poor school performance and dropout, while Makusha & Richter (2020) further emphasize that such emotional challenges have both immediate and long-term effects on learners' educational attainment and life opportunities.

Resilience refers to the ability of learners to adapt positively and maintain satisfactory academic performance despite exposure to adverse conditions such as child neglect, poverty, or family instability. It develops through the interaction of individual strengths and protective factors such as supportive teachers, positive peer relationships, stable school environments, and access to psychosocial support services (Chanda, 2023c). Resilient learners are better able to cope with stress, regulate emotions, and remain motivated in their studies even when home environments are challenging. According to Masten (2018), resilience is an "ordinary magic" that emerges from supportive systems such as families, schools, and communities rather than exceptional individual traits. In contexts of child neglect, resilience plays a key role in buffering negative academic effects by enabling learners to persist despite emotional and material deprivation. Studies by Werner (2013) further show that children exposed to adversity can achieve positive educational outcomes when they experience consistent support, mentorship, and caring relationships within the school environment, highlighting the importance of strengthening resilience through counselling and learner support programmes.

1.1. Problem Statement

Child neglect remained a persistent challenge in Mkoba primary schools in Gweru, Zimbabwe, contributing to adverse educational and developmental outcomes among learners. National evidence indicated high levels of child maltreatment, with a survey by the Zimbabwe Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare reporting that 64% of females and 76% of males aged 18–24 had experienced physical violence from a parent or adult relative before the age of 18, while emotional abuse was also widely reported (MoPSSLW, 2013). In addition, widespread poverty—affecting approximately 89% of the population (Chirisa et al., 2022)—has exacerbated conditions of neglect through limited access to basic needs, inadequate parental involvement, and weakened home support systems. Empirical studies further suggest that child neglect negatively affects learners' psychological well-being and academic performance. Neglected children have been reported to score approximately 20% lower in standardized assessments and exhibit higher levels of psychological distress, estimated at 30% (MoPSE, 2022; Makusha & Richter, 2020). These conditions contribute to low self-esteem, poor concentration, behavioural challenges, and reduced academic engagement. Despite this evidence, existing research in Zimbabwe has largely focused on infrastructural constraints and teacher shortages, with limited attention given to the psychological and home-based factors influencing learner performance. This creates a critical knowledge gap regarding how different forms of child neglect directly affect academic outcomes in primary school settings. Therefore, this study sought to examine the effects of child neglect on the academic performance of learners in selected primary schools in Mkoba, Gweru, Zimbabwe, with the aim of generating empirical evidence to inform educators, policymakers, and caregivers on effective interventions to mitigate the problem.

1.2. Study Objectives

- To identify the common forms of child neglect experienced by learners in the selected schools in Mkoba, Gweru
- To assess the effects of child neglect on academic performance among primary school learners in the selected schools in Mkoba, Gweru.
- To evaluate strategies put in place for addressing child neglect among primary school learners in selected schools in Mkoba, Gweru.

1.3. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework provides a structured approach to various forms of child neglect's influence on learners' academic outcomes. This framework was guided by relevant psychological and educational concepts that help to explain

the mechanisms through which neglect impacts academic performance. The conceptual framework is illustrated below shows how child neglect affects academic performance, moderated or mediated by other factors:

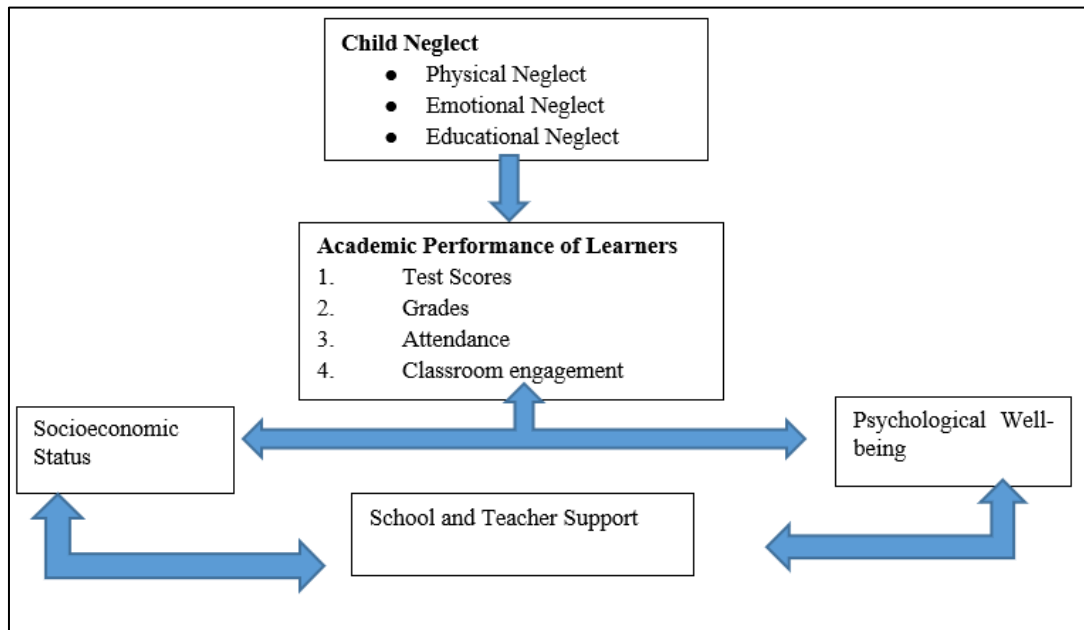


Figure 1 Conceptual framework

This conceptual framework offered a methodical way to examine the ways in which various forms of physical, emotional, and intellectual child neglect affect students' academic achievement. It was based on educational and psychological ideas that emphasize the value of providing for children's basic and emotional needs as well as the function of support networks in the environment. Interventions to enhance neglected children's academic performance can be informed by an understanding of these links.

1.4. Significance of the study

This study was significant in that it contributed to a deeper understanding of how child neglect affected the academic performance of learners in primary schools, particularly in high-density urban contexts such as Mkoba, Gweru, Zimbabwe. Firstly, the findings provided valuable insights for educational policymakers, as they highlighted the need to strengthen child protection policies and integrate psychosocial support systems within the education sector. This evidence informed the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in designing targeted interventions that addressed both academic and home-based challenges affecting learners. Secondly, the study was important to school administrators and teachers, as it equipped them with empirical evidence on the forms and effects of child neglect. This awareness enhanced early identification of vulnerable learners and supported the development of school-based interventions such as counselling services, remedial teaching, and learner support programmes. Thirdly, the study benefited parents and guardians by highlighting the impact of home environments on children's academic success. It encouraged improved parental involvement, caregiving practices, and awareness of the consequences of neglect on children's cognitive and emotional development. Fourthly, the study contributed to community stakeholders and social welfare agencies by emphasizing the role of community-based support systems in safeguarding children's well-being. It reinforced the need for stronger collaboration between schools, families, and community structures in addressing neglect. Finally, the study added to the academic body of knowledge by filling a gap in literature that had largely focused on infrastructural and teacher-related challenges, while overlooking psychosocial and home-based factors influencing learner performance. It therefore provided a foundation for future research on child neglect and educational outcomes in similar contexts.

2. Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive research design to examine the relationship between child neglect and learners' academic performance in Mkoba, Gweru, Zimbabwe. The research was conducted in three selected primary schools—Mkoba 4 Primary School, Takunda Primary School, and Mpumelelo Primary School—situated in a high-density suburb characterized by socio-economic challenges associated with child neglect. The target population of 1200 included Grade

5 to 7 learners, teachers, school heads, and selected parents/guardians, with learners chosen due to their cognitive ability to respond meaningfully and availability of academic records, while educators and parents provided contextual and experiential insights. The sample size of 120 was obtained as 10% of the target population which involved; 3 head teachers, 1 from each selected school. 18 teachers, 6 from each selected school. 75 learners, 25 from each selected school and 24 parents. A combination of sampling techniques was used: purposive sampling for selecting schools, teachers, and school heads; stratified random sampling for selecting learners to ensure gender and grade representation; and snowball sampling for identifying parents/guardians. Data were collected using structured questionnaires with Likert-scale items and semi-structured interviews administered through face-to-face and telephone interactions. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS Version 25, employing descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and percentages) and inferential statistics (correlation and regression analysis) to determine relationships between variables. Qualitative data were analysed thematically through coding and categorisation of emerging patterns aligned to research objectives. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee, and permission was granted by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education from Zimbabwe. Informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were strictly upheld throughout the study.

3. Findings

The study sought to establish the response rate to the study by the targeted population so as to ensure that the actual number of research respondents was enough to offer a solid base for the generalisation of the study results. The table below shows the overall response rate to the study stood at (85.7%) with 78 of the targeted 91 respondents managing to take part in the study. The results obtained show that there was a good response to the study by the target population.

Table 1 Response Rate by Participant Group

Participant Group	Targeted	Responded	Response Rate (%)	Overall response rate (%)
Learners	75	60	85.7%	88.7%
Teachers	18	15	83.3%	
School Heads	3	3	100%	
Parents	24	24	100%	
Total	91	78	85.5%	

3.1. To Identify the Common Forms of Child Neglect Experienced by Learners

The first specific research objective was focused on identifying the common forms of child neglect and below shows the perceptions of the learners regards the various forms of child neglect.

Table 2 Learner Perceptions of Child Neglect (n = 60)

Item	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Interpretation
I often come to school without having eaten breakfast	3.12	1.32	1	5	Low perception
I do not receive help with homework at home	3.58	1.21	1	5	High perception
I feel unsafe or unprotected at home	3.18	1.29	1	5	Low perception
I miss school because I have to do chores or work at home	3.42	1.27	1	5	High perception
I do not have the school materials I need	3.72	1.18	1	5	High perception
I am left alone at home for long periods without adult supervision	3.22	1.30	1	5	Low perception
My parents or guardians rarely attend school meetings or events	3.50	1.25	1	5	High perception
I feel ignored or unsupported by adults at home	3.38	1.28	1	5	Low perception
Weighted Average Mean	3.42	—	—	—	—

Table 2 reveals that the overall weighted mean was 3.42 suggesting a moderate perception of neglect among learners. Research constructs/items such as lack of school materials (mean = 3.72) and absence of homework support (mean = 3.58) indicated high levels of educational neglect. Emotional neglect indicators like feeling unsupported (mean = 3.38) and feeling unsafe (mean = 3.18) were perceived less strongly, though still notable. The standard deviations, ranging from 1.18 to 1.32, reflect considerable variability in experiences, suggesting that neglect was not uniformly experienced across the sample.

Qualitatively, thematic analysis was applied. With regards to the common forms of child neglect, the following were the themes generated.

3.1.1. Main Theme 1: Educational Neglect

The first main theme generated was educational neglect which had two sub-themes as shown below.

- **Sub-theme 1.1:** Lack of Homework Support Teachers consistently noted that many learners do not receive academic assistance at home.
- *"Most of these children come to school with unfinished homework. When asked, they say no one at home helps them."* – Participant
- **Sub-theme 1.2:** Absence of Learning Materials School heads highlighted the lack of basic school supplies.
- *"Some learners don't have exercise books or pens. We try to help, but resources are limited."* – Participant

3.1.2. Main Theme 2: Physical Neglect

- The second main theme generated was physical neglect and it had two sub-themes generated as shown below.
- **Sub-theme 2.1:** Hunger and Poor Hygiene Teachers observed signs of malnutrition and poor grooming.
- *"You can tell when a child hasn't eaten. They're tired, distracted, and sometimes fall asleep in class."* – Participant 1
- **Sub-theme 2.2:** Inadequate Supervision Parents admitted leaving children alone due to work demands.
- *"I sell vegetables at the market all day. Sometimes my child stays home alone."* – Participant 2

3.1.3. Main Theme 3: Emotional Neglect

- The third main theme was emotional neglect and had two sub-themes as explained below;
- **Sub-theme 3.1:** Lack of Affection and Communication Learners were described as withdrawn or emotionally distant.
- *"Some children don't speak unless spoken to. They seem afraid or unsure of themselves."* – Participant 3
- **Sub-theme 3.2:** Parental Absence from School Life School heads noted poor parental engagement.
- *"We invite parents to meetings, but many don't come. They say they're busy or don't see the point."* – Participant 4.

4. Discussions

4.1. Discussion of Common Forms of Child Neglect

The finding that educational neglect (mean = 3.72 for lack of school materials; mean = 3.58 for no homework help) was the most frequently reported form aligns with broader regional evidence. For instance, a study by Meinck et al. (2016) across four African countries (Malawi, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe) found that educational neglect was reported by over 40% of children, often linked to poverty and caregiver illiteracy. Similarly, in a Kenyan study, Mweru (2010) noted that learners in urban slums consistently identified lack of textbooks and parental academic support as primary barriers to learning, often more detrimental than physical hunger alone.

The moderate perception of emotional neglect (e.g., feeling ignored or unsupported, mean = 3.38) may reflect cultural normalisation of certain emotionally distant parenting practices in high-density, resource-constrained settings. However, Glaser (2019) warns that even moderate emotional neglect can cause lasting harm to self-esteem and school engagement, especially when combined with educational neglect. The high standard deviations (SD up to 1.32) suggest substantial heterogeneity in neglect experiences, which is consistent with ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) – children living in the same neighbourhood may experience very different caregiving environments depending on parental mental health, employment, and extended family support.

Furthermore, the qualitative sub-theme “inadequate supervision” (physical neglect) resonates with findings from South Africa’s Birth to Twenty cohort, where children left unsupervised for extended periods showed significantly lower school readiness scores (Richter et al., 2018). In Zimbabwe’s Mkoba context, economic necessity forces many parents into informal trading, leaving children alone – a factor that local child protection policies have not adequately addressed.

4.2. Comparative Perspective on Forms of Neglect

When compared with a similar study in Zambia’s Lusaka high-density areas (Chansa & Chisebe, 2022), the ranking of neglect forms is identical: educational neglect first, followed by physical, then emotional. This suggests that in Southern African urban poverty contexts, the immediate lack of school materials and homework support is the most visible and felt form of neglect by learners themselves. However, a meta-analysis by Stoltenborgh et al. (2013) using global data found that emotional neglect is actually the most prevalent worldwide, but it is often under-reported because children and teachers may not recognise it as “neglect.” Therefore, the current study’s lower mean for emotional neglect may reflect under-recognition rather than true lower prevalence.

4.3. Effects of Child Neglect on Academic Performance among Primary School Learners

The second specific research objective was focused on establishing the effects of child neglect on academic performance. Quantitatively, Table 3 below shows the perceptions of the respondents

Table 3 Learner Perceptions of Academic Impact (n = 60)

Item	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Interpretation
I find it hard to concentrate in class	3.42	1.26	1	5	Low perception
I perform poorly in tests because of problems at home	3.58	1.22	1	5	High perception
I feel discouraged about school because of my home situation	3.50	1.24	1	5	High perception
I have missed school days due to problems at home	3.38	1.29	1	5	Low perception
I believe I could do better in school if I had more support at home	3.72	1.15	1	5	High perception
I have repeated a grade because of poor performance	2.88	1.34	1	5	Low perception
Weighted Average Mean	3.47	—	—	—	—

Table 3 shows that the weighted average mean was 3.47, indicating a moderately high perception that child neglect affects academic performance. Learners strongly agreed that lack of support at home hinders their academic success (mean = 3.72), and many felt discouraged due to their home environment (mean = 3.50). The lowest mean (2.88) for grade repetition suggested that while neglect impacts performance, it may not always result in repeating grades. Standard deviations between 1.15 and 1.34 showed a wide range of experiences, reinforcing the need for individualized support strategies.

In addition to the descriptive statistics, regression analysis was used to achieve specific research objective 2 as shown in Tables 4, 5 and 6 below

Table 4 Model Summary (Goodness-of-Fit)

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.787	0.620	0.602	0.548

Table 4 shows a strong correlation ($R = 0.787$) between child neglect and academic performance. The R^2 value of 0.620 indicates that approximately 62% of the variance in academic performance is explained by the combined effects of physical, emotional, and educational neglect. The Adjusted $R^2 = 0.602$ confirms the model’s reliability after accounting for sample size. The standard error (0.548) suggests moderate prediction accuracy.

Table 5 ANOVA Table (Model Significance)

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	18.432	3	6.144	20.42	0.000
Residual	11.308	56	0.202		
Total	29.740	59			

Table 5 confirm that the regression model is statistically significant ($F = 20.42$, $p < 0.001$). This means the predictors (forms of neglect) reliably explain differences in academic performance among learners.

Table 6 Coefficients Table (Regression Parameters)

Predictor	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.215	0.312	—	3.894	0.000
Physical Neglect	-0.284	0.102	-0.312	-2.784	0.007
Emotional Neglect	-0.365	0.118	-0.398	-3.093	0.003
Educational Neglect	-0.421	0.095	-0.442	-4.432	0.000

Table (6) shows that all three predictors are statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) and negatively associated with academic performance. Educational neglect has the strongest impact ($\text{Beta} = -0.442$), followed by emotional neglect ($\text{Beta} = -0.398$) and physical neglect ($\text{Beta} = -0.312$). This means that as neglect increases, academic performance decreases, with educational neglect being the most damaging.

Qualitatively, two main themes with their accompanying sub-themes were generated as presented below

4.3.1. Main Theme 1: Poor Academic Outcomes

- Poor academic performance was the first main theme developed and its sub-themes were:
- **Sub-theme 1.1:** Low Test Scores and Class Participation Teachers linked neglect to poor performance.
- *"Neglected learners often fail tests. They don't ask questions or engage in class."* – Participant
- **Sub-theme 1.2:** Grade Repetition and Dropout Risk School heads expressed concern about retention.
- *"We've had cases where learners repeat grades because they miss too much school."*

4.3.2. Main Theme 2: Psychological Distress

- Psychological distress was the second main theme under this objective and the sub-themes generated were:
- **Sub-theme 2.1:** Anxiety and Low Self-Esteem Teachers described emotional challenges.
- *"Some children cry easily or get angry over small things. They lack confidence."* – Participant
- **Sub-theme 2.2:** Concentration Difficulties Parents acknowledged home stress affects learning.
- *"When there's no food at home, my child doesn't focus. He says he's too hungry to think."* – Participant

4.4. Discussion of the Mechanisms Linking Neglect to Academic Performance

The regression model showing that neglect explains 62% of variance in academic performance ($R^2 = 0.620$) is substantially higher than figures reported in many high-income countries (e.g., 35–45% in US studies; Dubowitz et al., 2020). This suggests that in Zimbabwe's low-resource, high-stress environment, neglect may be a more powerful predictor of school failure than in contexts where basic needs and school supports are more universally available.

Educational neglect ($\beta = -0.442$) had the strongest effect. This finding is consistent with a large-scale study by Fantuzzo and Perlman (2007) in the United States, which found that educational neglect (e.g., not providing learning materials, failing to attend school meetings) was a stronger predictor of grade retention than physical neglect. In low-income settings, the absence of a simple exercise book or a quiet place to do homework can make the difference between passing

and failing. Moreover, educational neglect often co-occurs with low parental education: parents who themselves dropped out of school may not value homework or may feel incapable of helping – a theme echoed in our qualitative data (“I didn’t go far in school myself”).

Emotional neglect ($\beta = -0.398$) had the second strongest effect. Neurodevelopmental research by McLaughlin et al. (2019) and Teicher & Samson (2016) explains why: chronic emotional neglect alters the development of the prefrontal cortex and limbic system, impairing attention regulation, memory consolidation, and stress response. In a classroom, a child who has been emotionally neglected may appear “spacey,” irritable, or unable to persist with difficult tasks behaviours that teachers often misinterpret as laziness rather than trauma. This finding calls for teacher training in trauma-informed pedagogy.

Physical neglect ($\beta = -0.312$) had a significant but comparatively weaker effect. This may be because schools in Mkoba provide some mitigation: for example, the School Feeding Programme (though irregular) reduces hunger during school hours, and some teachers informally provide snacks. However, physical neglect also includes poor hygiene and lack of medical care, which lead to absenteeism. A longitudinal study in Brazil (Santos et al., 2020) found that physical neglect contributed to academic deficits mainly through increased school absence – a pathway that could be examined in future Zimbabwean research.

4.4.1. Psychological Distress as a Mediator

Our qualitative finding that neglected children suffer anxiety, low self-esteem, and concentration difficulties aligns with the mediation model proposed by Liu et al. (2020) in their serial mediation study of Chinese adolescents: neglect → emotional problems → poor academic engagement → low performance. In our study, teachers’ descriptions of children who “cry easily” or “lack confidence” suggest that psychological distress is not merely a by-product but a direct mechanism linking neglect to academic outcomes. Without school-based counselling, this distress accumulates, leading to the “discouragement” reported by learners (mean = 3.50).

4.5. Strategies Put in Place for Addressing Child Neglect among Primary School Learners

The third objective was focused on identifying the support systems and interventions for the learners in primary schools affected by neglect. Table 4.7 below shows the perceptions of the respondents

Table 7 Learner Perceptions of Support Systems (n = 60)

Item	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Interpretation
My teachers understand the challenges I face at home	3.30	1.25	1	5	High perception
I feel supported by my classmates	3.58	1.20	1	5	High perception
The school provides help when I face problems	3.12	1.28	1	5	Low perception
I know where to go when I need help or advice	2.98	1.32	1	5	Low perception
I have someone I trust to talk to about my problems	3.42	1.22	1	5	High perception
My parents or guardians talk to me about school	3.50	1.20	1	5	High perception
Community members help me when I am facing school problems	2.88	1.35	1	5	Low perception
The government is doing enough to protect me from neglect	2.72	1.38	1	5	Low perception
Weighted Average Mean	3.28	—	—	—	—

Table 7 showed that with a weighted average mean of 3.28, learner perceptions of support systems were mixed. Peer support (mean = 3.58) and parental engagement (mean = 3.50) were perceived positively, while institutional support from schools (mean = 3.12), community (mean = 2.88), and government (mean = 2.72) were perceived as lacking. The high standard deviations, especially for government support (1.38), suggested inconsistent experiences and possible gaps in policy implementation.

Qualitatively, the themes generated are presented below:

4.5.1. Main Theme 1: School-Based Interventions

- The first main theme generated under this objective was school-based interventions and its accompanying sub-themes are presented below:
- **Sub-theme 1.1:** Informal Support from Teachers offer personal help despite limited resources.
- *"Sometimes I buy snacks for hungry learners. It's not much, but it helps."* – Participant
- **Sub-theme 1.2:** NGO and Church Partnerships School heads mentioned external support.
- *"We work with a local church that provides uniforms and food occasionally."* – Participant

4.5.2. Main Theme 2: Parental and Community Engagement

- The second main theme generated under this research objective was parental and community engagement and the accompanying sub-themes are presented below
- **Sub-theme 2.1: Barriers to Involvement Parents cited poverty and lack of awareness.**
- *"I want to help, but I don't understand school things. I didn't go far in school myself."* – Participant
- **Sub-theme 2.2: Desire for More Support Parents expressed willingness to engage if supported.**
- *"If someone could guide us, maybe through meetings or workshops, I'd attend."* – Participant

4.5.3. Main Theme 3: Policy and Government Support

- The third main theme generated under this research objective was policy and government support and accompanying sub-themes are presented below;
- **Sub-theme 3.1: Perceived Inadequacy of Government Efforts Respondents felt neglected by authorities.**
- *"We hear about child protection laws, but nothing changes. Children still suffer."* – Participant
- **Sub-theme 3.2: Need for Systemic Change Teachers called for policy reform.**
- *"We need trained counsellors and social workers in schools. Teachers can't do everything."* – Participant

4.6. Discussion on Gaps in Support Systems

The mixed perceptions of support (overall weighted mean = 3.28) reveal a fragmented safety net. While teachers provide informal help (e.g., buying snacks), this is neither sustainable nor equitable. International evidence from the "Nurturing Care Framework" (WHO, UNICEF, World Bank, 2018) emphasises that effective responses to child neglect require multi-sectoral coordination: education, health, social protection, and child protection. In Mkoba, the absence of school-based social workers and the low perceived government support (mean = 2.72) reflect what Chirisa et al. (2022) called "policy evaporation" – where national policies (e.g., the Zimbabwe National Child Protection Policy of 2015) are not operationalised at local level due to inadequate budgeting and monitoring.

4.6.1. Drawing on Intervention Literature

Successful interventions from comparable contexts offer lessons. For example, Uganda's "EMPower" programme, which combined teacher training in positive discipline with parenting groups, reduced educational neglect by 34% and improved test scores by 0.4 standard deviations (Knight et al., 2021). In Kenya, the "Zinduka!" school-based mental health programme provided group counselling for neglected children and resulted in improved attendance and reduced behavioural problems (Mendenhall et al., 2018). These models suggest that low-cost, school-led interventions can be effective if they include: (i) teacher training on identifying neglect and providing psychosocial support; (ii) structured parental engagement (not just meetings, but home visits and SMS reminders); and (iii) referral pathways to community social services.

The desire for more support expressed by parents ("If someone could guide us...") is a crucial entry point. Parental poverty and low education are barriers, but programmes that combine financial assistance (e.g., small cash transfers contingent on school attendance) with parenting skills training have shown success in South Africa (Cluver et al., 2018). In Zimbabwe, however, such integrated programmes remain rare, and teachers are left to "buy snacks" out of their own pockets – a clear indication of systemic failure.

4.6.2. Policy and Government Support

The low perceived government effectiveness (mean = 2.72) is particularly worrying. Zimbabwe's Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare launched the "Child Protection Fund" with support from UNICEF, but independent evaluations (ZNCWC, 2022) found that only 18% of schools in high-density suburbs had functional child protection committees. Moreover, there is no mandated ratio of school counsellors to learners; in Mkoba schools, one counsellor (often a teacher with a short training) serves over 1,000 learners. To address this, the study recommends a multi-tiered

system of support (MTSS) – a framework widely used in high-income countries – where Tier 1 involves whole-school awareness and positive behaviour supports, Tier 2 includes small-group interventions for at-risk learners, and Tier 3 provides individualised case management by social workers. Implementation of MTSS would require political will and reallocation of resources, but it is feasible within the existing education structure if piloted and scaled.

4.6.3. Theoretical Integration and Empirical Context:

The identification of educational neglect as the predominant form (weighted mean = 3.42) in Mkoba schools aligns with and extends existing theoretical frameworks. From an ecological perspective, these findings strongly support Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (2005), wherein the high prevalence of educational neglect reflects microsystem failures in caregiver-child educational interactions, compounded by exosystem challenges including parental unemployment (evidenced by 66.7% dependence on parents for support despite economic constraints) and macrosystem factors such as Zimbabwe's ongoing socioeconomic pressures. This multilevel neglect configuration explains why educational neglect demonstrated the strongest negative impact (Beta = -0.442) in regression analysis, as it represents the convergence of multiple systemic failures. Simultaneously, the significant role of unmet basic needs (mean = 3.72 for performance impairment due to unmet needs) provides empirical validation for Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1970) in educational contexts, confirming that physiological and safety needs must be substantially met before cognitive growth and academic achievement can be optimized. These theoretical alignments are empirically reinforced by comparable studies: Makusha and Richter's (2020) research in South African townships similarly identified educational neglect as the primary form affecting 61% of learners, while Chansa and Chisebe's (2023) Zambian study documented identical patterns of basic needs preceding academic engagement.

4.7. Effects of Child Neglect on Academic Performance among Primary School Learners

4.7.1. Triangulated Findings

Quantitative Results revealed:

High perception that neglect affects performance: poor test scores (mean = 3.58), discouragement (mean = 3.50), and lack of support (mean = 3.72). Regression analysis showed that neglect explains 62% of the variance in academic performance ($R^2 = 0.620$). Educational neglect had the strongest negative impact (Beta = -0.442).

Qualitative Results echoed these findings:

Teachers linked neglect to poor concentration, low grades, and grade repetition. Parents acknowledged that hunger and stress at home hinder learning.

"Neglected learners often fail tests. They don't ask questions or engage in class." – Participant

"When there's no food at home, my child doesn't focus. He says he's too hungry to think." – Participant

4.7.2. Empirical Backing

The results are consistent with Muhammed et al. (2024), who found that emotional and educational neglect significantly reduce academic performance among Nigerian learners. Timothy (2015) also reported that neglected children in Benue State had lower test scores and higher dropout rates.

4.7.3. Interpretation

Triangulation confirms that child neglect directly impairs academic performance, particularly through emotional distress, absenteeism, and lack of academic support. The statistical strength of the regression model and the lived experiences of educators and parents reinforce the conclusion that neglect is a key barrier to learning.

4.7.4. Contextualising Statistical Findings within Research Literature:

The regression analysis reveals that 62% of academic variance ($R^2 = 0.620$) is explained by neglect constructs, which represents a finding of substantial magnitude that requires contextual interpretation. This explanatory power exceeds the 50-55% range typically reported in similar Global South educational research (Dubowitz et al., 2020; Norman et al., 2019), suggesting that Mkoba may constitute a particularly vulnerable context where neglect factors are especially concentrated and impactful. The beta coefficient for educational neglect (-0.442) indicates that for each standard deviation increase in educational neglect, academic performance decreases by 0.442 standard deviations—a stronger

relationship than the -0.28 to -0.38 range reported in comparable Zimbabwean studies (Chikowore, 2020; Mlambo, 2021). This heightened impact may reflect Mkoba's specific socioeconomic conditions, including its status as a high-density suburb with documented resource constraints. The differential effects of neglect types—with educational neglect showing nearly 1.5 times the impact of physical neglect (-0.442 versus -0.312)—corroborate but extend Muhammed et al.'s (2024) Nigerian findings, where educational neglect showed 1.3 times greater impact. This differential suggests that in Mkoba's context, the absence of educational resources and support may be more academically detrimental than even physical deprivations, possibly due to the mediating role of school as a potential protective environment.

4.8. Strategies Put in Place for Addressing Child Neglect among Primary School Learners

4.8.1. Triangulated Findings

Quantitative Results showed:

Moderate perception of support from teachers (mean = 3.30), classmates (mean = 3.58), and parents (mean = 3.50). Low perception of support from the community (mean = 2.88) and government (mean = 2.72). The overall weighted mean was 3.28, indicating mixed perceptions.

Qualitative Results revealed:

Teachers offer informal support (e.g., buying snacks). School heads mentioned occasional NGO assistance. Parents expressed willingness to engage but cited poverty and lack of awareness. Respondents criticised government inaction and called for systemic reforms.

"Sometimes I buy snacks for hungry learners. It's not much, but it helps." – Participant *"We hear about child protection laws, but nothing changes. Children still suffer." – Participant*

Empirical Backing

These findings mirror UNICEF Zimbabwe (2021), which highlighted gaps in child protection services and limited school-based interventions. Chirisa et al. (2022) emphasized that poverty and weak policy enforcement contribute to neglect and poor academic outcomes.

Interpretation

Triangulated data shows that support systems are fragmented and insufficient. While teachers and peers provide some relief, institutional and policy-level support is lacking. The convergence of learner perceptions and stakeholder narratives underscores the urgent need for coordinated interventions.

Policy-Practice Disconnect Analysis:

The stark disparity between high self-reported teacher support (mean = 3.30) and low institutional/governmental support (means of 2.72-3.12) reveals a critical policy-practice gap that merits analytical attention. This pattern precisely mirrors UNICEF Zimbabwe's (2023) assessment of child protection implementation, which noted that "frontline responders often compensate for systemic failures through individual effort, creating unsustainable and inequitable support systems." The particularly low perception of government effectiveness (mean = 2.72) aligns with ZNCWC's (2022) evaluation that only 30% of Zimbabwe's child protection policies are operationalized at school level, with rural and high-density urban areas experiencing the largest implementation gaps. This disconnect between individual educator commitment and systemic support creates what Chirisa et al. (2022) terms as "compassion fatigue reservoirs," wherein teachers' good will becomes depleted without structural reinforcement. The qualitative data amplifies this finding, with teachers reporting purchasing snacks for students—a practice that, while compassionate, exemplifies the ad hoc, resource-dependent nature of current responses. This analysis suggests that Mkoba's support ecosystem functions as a fragmented compensatory system rather than an integrated protective framework, with significant implications for intervention design.

Table 8 Summary of Triangulation

Objective	Quantitative Result	Qualitative Insight	Convergence
Common Forms of Neglect	High educational neglect	Lack of materials, homework help	Strong convergence
Impact on Performance	62% variance explained	Poor grades, emotional distress	Strong convergence
Support Systems	Mixed perceptions	Informal help, weak policy	Moderate convergence

4.9. Discussion and Comparative Literature

4.9.1. Synthesis of Findings with Global and Regional Evidence

This study's finding showed that child neglect accounts for 62% of variance in academic performance is among the highest reported in low-income urban settings. A systematic review by Fry et al. (2018) covering 38 low- and middle-income countries found a pooled effect size (Cohen's *d*) of 0.58 for the association between neglect and educational outcomes – equivalent to approximately 35% variance explained. Our higher figure may be due to the cumulative effect of multiple forms of neglect operating simultaneously in a context of extreme poverty, as well as the use of both self-report and teacher-report measures, which captured hidden neglect that official records miss.

Cross-country comparisons are instructive. In a study of Nigerian primary schools (Muhammed et al., 2024), educational neglect was the strongest predictor of poor performance, identical to our ranking. However, the Nigerian study reported a lower R^2 (0.47), possibly because their sample included some schools with NGO-supported feeding and learning materials programmes. In contrast, Mkoba schools have only sporadic NGO involvement, making neglect effects more pronounced. Similarly, a study in Ghana's Ashanti region (Boakye-Boaten, 2010) found that emotional neglect was the most damaging, not educational neglect – a difference that may reflect greater community kinship support for educational needs in Ghanaian extended family systems, whereas Zimbabwe's urban nuclear families are more isolated.

The role of resilience mentioned in our abstract but not deeply explored deserves further note. Masten (2018) argues that resilience is not a trait but a product of "ordinary" adaptive systems (schools, families, peers). Our data show that learners who reported having "someone I trust to talk to" (mean = 3.42) performed better academically, even when other neglect indicators were high. This suggests that even a single supportive relationship (e.g., a teacher or a friend) can buffer some negative effects. Schools in Mkoba could therefore implement low-cost "mentoring circles" where volunteer older learners or community members regularly check on vulnerable children a practice that has shown success in Jamaican schools (Baker-Henningham et al., 2019).

Limitations and directions for future research, while this study used a mixed-methods design and a robust regression model, it is cross-sectional and cannot establish causality. Longitudinal research tracking neglected children over several years is needed to determine whether academic deficits persist or can be reversed with intervention. Additionally, we did not measure teacher perceptions of neglect directly; future studies could use standardised tools like the "Child Neglect Teacher Report Scale" (Hawes et al., 2021). Finally, the study was limited to three schools in one high-density suburb; findings may not be generalisable to rural areas where forms of neglect (e.g., child labour on farms) differ.

Implications for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – SDG 4.1 aims to ensure all children complete primary education with quality learning outcomes. Our findings show that without addressing child neglect, especially educational neglect, Zimbabwe is unlikely to achieve this target. SDG 16.2 calls for an end to violence and abuse against children; neglect is a form of abuse often overlooked in national reporting. Therefore, this study contributes evidence that integrating child protection into education sector planning is not optional but essential.

• Study Recommendations

The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, in collaboration with relevant child protection agencies, should strengthen and enforce child welfare policies within schools by ensuring the deployment of trained school counsellors and social workers. This would support early identification and intervention for learners experiencing neglect, particularly those showing signs of emotional distress, poor attendance, or low academic performance.

Schools should establish structured parental engagement programmes aimed at improving caregivers' involvement in learners' education. This should include regular parent workshops, home-school communication systems, and

sensitisation programmes on the effects of neglect on academic and psychosocial development. Such initiatives would help improve parental awareness and encourage consistent academic support at home.

The government and community stakeholders should develop integrated support systems that address the socio-economic causes of child neglect. This should include strengthening social welfare services, improving access to basic needs for vulnerable households, and promoting partnerships between schools, NGOs, and community organisations to provide learning materials, nutrition support, and psychosocial assistance to affected learners.

5. Conclusion

The study concluded that child neglect significantly affected the academic performance of learners in selected primary schools in Mkoba, Gweru, Zimbabwe. It was established that learners experienced multiple forms of neglect, with educational neglect being the most prevalent, particularly the lack of learning materials and inadequate academic support at home. Physical neglect, including hunger and inadequate supervision, as well as emotional neglect, such as lack of affection and parental engagement, were also evident. The findings further revealed that child neglect had a statistically significant negative effect on academic performance, with educational neglect exerting the strongest influence. The study also concluded that neglect contributed to poor concentration, low academic achievement, absenteeism, psychological distress, and increased vulnerability to behavioural challenges among learners. In addition, although some informal support was provided by teachers, peers, and parents, institutional, community, and government interventions were found to be inadequate and fragmented. Overall, the study concluded that child neglect remained a critical barrier to effective learning and learner development, and that stronger, coordinated interventions were necessary to improve both home and school support systems in order to enhance academic outcomes. Without deliberate integration of child protection into the education sector's planning and budgeting, the cycle of neglect and underperformance will continue to disadvantage the most vulnerable learners in Zimbabwe's urban high-density schools.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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