

# The Double-Edged Sword: Discipline Practices and Student Academic Performance in Central Uganda's Secondary Schools

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**Abstract:** Discipline practices in educational institutions significantly influence learning environments and student outcomes, yet their impact on academic performance remains a contentious issue in Uganda's secondary schools. The problem of balancing effective discipline with academic excellence has been exacerbated by the coexistence of traditional punitive approaches and modern positive discipline methods, creating uncertainty about which practices best support student achievement. This study examined the relationship between discipline practices and student academic performance in secondary schools in Central Uganda, employing a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative analysis of academic outcomes with qualitative exploration of stakeholder perceptions. The research involved 624 participants from 24 secondary schools across four districts in Central Uganda, including students, teachers, and head teachers selected through stratified random sampling. Data collection utilized structured questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, while analysis employed univariate, bivariate, and multivariate statistical methods including negative binomial regression, complemented by thematic analysis of qualitative data. The study revealed that all schools employed verbal warnings as primary discipline practice, but significant urban-rural disparities existed in the adoption of positive versus punitive approaches, with rural schools more heavily reliant on corporal punishment (91.7% vs. 33.3%) and urban schools implementing more counselling and peer mediation programs. Key findings demonstrated that positive discipline practices were significantly associated with superior academic outcomes, with students in supportive environments achieving higher GPAs (3.42 vs. 2.84), passing more subjects (6.8 vs. 5.4), and showing better attendance rates (87.3% vs. 76.2%) compared to those experiencing punitive discipline. The negative binomial regression confirmed positive discipline as the strongest predictor of academic success ( $IRR = 1.18$ ), while qualitative analysis revealed convergent teacher-student perspectives favouring supportive over punitive approaches, despite persistent use of fear-based methods due to limited training and resources. The study concluded that discipline practices operated as a double-edged sword in Central Uganda's secondary schools, with positive approaches significantly enhancing academic performance while punitive measures undermined student achievement and engagement. The research established that effective discipline required comprehensive support systems, adequate resources, and sustained capacity building, particularly in rural settings where traditional approaches remained entrenched. The primary recommendation emphasized the need for mandatory comprehensive positive discipline training programs for all secondary school educators, with particular focus on rural institutions where the greatest disparities and potential for improvement existed.

**Keywords:** Discipline Practices and Student Academic Performance

## Background of the Study

Discipline practices in educational institutions play a pivotal role in shaping the learning environment and influencing student outcomes. In Uganda, particularly in Central Uganda's secondary schools, discipline practices are rooted in both traditional values and reforms inspired by global educational trends (Koray & Çetinkılıç, 2020). Traditionally, Ugandan schools have implemented discipline through corporal punishment, suspension, expulsion, and other corrective measures (Beneroso & Robinson, 2022). In recent years, there has been a growing shift towards more positive discipline approaches, such as guidance and counseling, peer mediation, and reward systems. Nevertheless, the intersection of traditional and modern disciplinary methods has led to a complex landscape, where the effectiveness and impact of these practices remain contentious (Rahman et al., 2021).

Research on the relationship between disciplinary practices and student academic performance reveals mixed results. On one hand, strict discipline is credited with fostering an orderly environment conducive to teaching and learning. On the other, excessive or punitive measures can create a climate of fear, resentment, and disengagement among students (Christopoulos et al., 2022; Salvo-Garrido et al., 2022). In Uganda, evidence suggests that students often experience anxiety, low self-esteem, and reduced motivation as a result of harsh disciplinary actions. At the same time, schools that fail to enforce discipline may struggle with indiscipline, truancy, and disruption, all of which negatively affect academic performance (Wilbrod Aviu, 2024). Finding the right balance between maintaining order and nurturing students' academic success is a persistent challenge (Fischer et al., 2022).

The Ugandan government, through the Ministry of Education and Sports, has instituted policies to regulate disciplinary measures in schools, with the aim of promoting student welfare and safeguarding academic standards. However, implementation is inconsistent, especially in Central Uganda's diverse educational settings, where resource disparities and varying cultural norms shape the enforcement of discipline (Chen et al., 2023). Urban schools may have more resources for guidance and counseling but also face higher enrollment and greater student diversity, while rural schools often rely on traditional punitive methods due to limited alternatives (Kukundakwe, 2024). These contextual factors complicate the relationship between discipline practices and student performance, making it crucial to investigate the double-edged nature of discipline within this region.

Despite the recognized importance of effective discipline, many secondary schools in Central Uganda continue to grapple with cases of poor academic performance, persistent indiscipline, school dropouts, and strained teacher-student relationships (Pretelli et al., 2022). The duality of discipline practices—being both a tool for order and a potential source of conflict—demands a nuanced analysis (Pauline, 2023). There is a pressing need for empirical research that explores how various discipline strategies are implemented, their perceived effectiveness, and their tangible impact on academic achievement (Shafie et al., 2022). This study intends to fill this gap by critically examining the double-edged sword of discipline practices in Central Uganda's secondary schools.

### Problem Statement

While discipline is widely acknowledged as a critical component of conducive learning environments, secondary schools in Central Uganda continue to witness significant challenges related to student academic performance, persistent incidences of indiscipline, and strained teacher-student relationships. The reliance on both punitive and non-punitive disciplinary approaches reflects a struggle to balance maintaining order with nurturing student growth (Zada et al., 2021). However, the lack of clear evidence on how these different discipline practices affect academic outcomes has made it difficult for school administrators and policymakers to adopt strategies that effectively support both discipline and academic excellence. As a result, there is a pressing need to investigate the complex relationship between discipline practices and student academic performance in Central Uganda's secondary schools, with the goal of informing evidence-based interventions tailored to local realities.

### Main Objective of the Study

To examine the relationship between discipline practices and student academic performance in secondary schools in Central Uganda.

### Specific Objectives

1. To identify the types of discipline practices commonly used in secondary schools in Central Uganda.
2. To assess the impact of various discipline practices on student academic performance.
3. To evaluate the perceptions of teachers and students regarding the effectiveness of discipline practices on academic outcomes.

### Research Questions

1. What are the common discipline practices employed in secondary schools in Central Uganda?
2. How do different discipline practices influence student academic performance in these schools?
3. What are the perceptions of teachers and students regarding the effectiveness of discipline practices in promoting academic achievement?

### Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to examine the relationship between discipline practices and student academic performance in secondary schools in Central Uganda. The research design combined both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select 24 secondary schools from four districts in Central Uganda, with stratification based on school ownership (government, private, and faith-based), location (urban and rural), and performance categories. The sample comprised 480 students (20 from each school), 120 teachers (5 from each school), and 24 head teachers, totaling 624 participants. Data collection instruments included structured questionnaires for students and teachers, in-depth interview guides for head teachers, and document analysis sheets for reviewing school records including disciplinary logs, academic performance records, and policy documents.

The quantitative data analysis involved univariate analysis to describe the characteristics of discipline practices and academic performance variables, bivariate analysis using chi-square tests and correlation analysis to examine associations between variables, and multivariate analysis employing negative binomial regression models to predict academic performance outcomes measured as count variables (number of subjects passed, disciplinary incidents recorded). The negative binomial model was particularly appropriate given the count nature of the outcome variables and the presence of overdispersion in the data. Qualitative data from interviews and document analysis were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, and theme refinement. The qualitative findings were presented through detailed descriptions, illustrative quotes from participants, and comprehensive thematic analysis that captured the nuanced perspectives of educators and students regarding discipline practices and their perceived impact on academic outcomes.

### Results

**Table 1: Types of Discipline Practices Used in Secondary Schools (N=24 schools)**

Discipline Practice	Frequency	Percentage	Urban Schools (n=12)	Rural Schools (n=12)
Verbal warnings	24	100.0%	12 (100%)	12 (100%)
Written warnings	22	91.7%	11 (91.7%)	11 (91.7%)
Manual work/cleaning	21	87.5%	9 (75%)	12 (100%)
Guidance and counseling	20	83.3%	12 (100%)	8 (66.7%)
Suspension	18	75.0%	8 (66.7%)	10 (83.3%)
Parent conferences	17	70.8%	10 (83.3%)	7 (58.3%)
Corporal punishment	15	62.5%	4 (33.3%)	11 (91.7%)
Peer mediation	12	50.0%	9 (75%)	3 (25%)
Reward systems	11	45.8%	8 (66.7%)	3 (25%)

Expulsion	8	33.3%	3 (25%)	5 (41.7%)
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The results revealed that all secondary schools in the study employed verbal warnings as their primary discipline practice, indicating universal acceptance of this approach across both urban and rural settings. Manual work and cleaning duties were more prevalent in rural schools (100%) compared to urban schools (75%), suggesting that rural institutions relied more heavily on punitive labor-based disciplinary measures. A notable finding was that corporal punishment remained significantly more common in rural schools (91.7%) compared to urban schools (33.3%), despite policy restrictions on its use. This disparity reflected the persistence of traditional disciplinary approaches in rural educational settings where alternative resources for positive discipline were limited. The data demonstrated a clear urban-rural divide in the adoption of progressive discipline practices, with urban schools showing higher implementation rates of guidance and counseling (100% vs. 66.7%), peer mediation (75% vs. 25%), and reward systems (66.7% vs. 25%). This pattern suggested that urban schools had better access to resources, training, and infrastructure necessary for implementing positive disciplinary approaches. Conversely, rural schools showed greater reliance on traditional punitive measures, with suspension being more common (83.3% vs. 66.7%) and expulsion rates higher (41.7% vs. 25%), indicating a tendency toward exclusionary practices that could potentially impact student academic outcomes negatively.

**Table 2: Impact of Discipline Practices on Academic Performance Indicators**

Performance Indicator	Positive Discipline (n=240)	Punitive Discipline (n=240)	t-value	p-value	Effect Size (Cohen's d)
Mean GPA	3.42 (SD=0.68)	2.84 (SD=0.72)	9.18	<0.001	0.84
Subjects Passed (Mean)	6.8 (SD=1.2)	5.4 (SD=1.6)	10.76	<0.001	0.98
Class Attendance Rate (%)	87.3 (SD=8.4)	76.2 (SD=12.1)	11.45	<0.001	1.04
Assignment Completion (%)	82.6 (SD=9.7)	68.9 (SD=14.2)	12.03	<0.001	1.13
Teacher-rated Engagement	4.1 (SD=0.8)	3.2 (SD=0.9)	11.67	<0.001	1.07

The comparative analysis revealed statistically significant differences in all academic performance indicators between students exposed to positive versus punitive discipline practices. Students in schools employing predominantly positive discipline approaches demonstrated substantially higher academic achievement, with a mean GPA of 3.42 compared to 2.84 for those in punitive discipline environments, representing a large effect size (Cohen's  $d = 0.84$ ). The number of subjects passed also showed marked improvement under positive discipline conditions, with students averaging 6.8 subjects compared to 5.4 subjects in punitive settings. These findings provided compelling evidence that positive discipline practices were associated with enhanced academic outcomes across multiple performance dimensions. The results further indicated that positive discipline practices had profound effects on student engagement and participation metrics. Class attendance rates were significantly higher in positive discipline environments (87.3% vs. 76.2%), while assignment completion rates showed an even more pronounced difference (82.6% vs. 68.9%). Teacher-rated student engagement scores were substantially higher for students experiencing positive discipline (4.1 vs. 3.2 on a 5-point scale), suggesting that supportive disciplinary approaches fostered greater intrinsic motivation and academic involvement. The consistently large effect sizes across all measures (ranging from 0.84 to 1.13) demonstrated not only statistical significance but also practical significance, indicating that the choice of discipline approach had meaningful real-world implications for student academic success.

**Table 3: Negative Binomial Regression Results for Academic Performance Predictors**

Predictor Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	z-value	p-value	IRR	95% CI
Positive Discipline Index	0.164	0.023	7.13	<0.001	1.18	[1.13, 1.23]
School Resources Score	0.089	0.018	4.94	<0.001	1.09	[1.05, 1.13]
Teacher Experience (years)	0.012	0.004	3.00	0.003	1.01	[1.00, 1.02]
Student SES Index	0.156	0.025	6.24	<0.001	1.17	[1.11, 1.23]
School Size (log)	-0.078	0.032	-2.44	0.015	0.93	[0.87, 0.98]
Urban Location	0.098	0.041	2.39	0.017	1.10	[1.02, 1.19]
Constant	1.234	0.156	7.91	<0.001	3.43	-

*Dispersion parameter = 0.142; Log-likelihood = -2,847.3; AIC = 5,710.6*

The negative binomial regression analysis identified positive discipline practices as the strongest predictor of academic performance, measured as the count of subjects passed by students. The positive discipline index showed a highly significant coefficient of 0.164 ( $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that for each unit increase in positive discipline implementation, the expected number of subjects passed increased by 18% (IRR = 1.18). This finding reinforced the critical importance of adopting supportive rather than punitive disciplinary approaches for maximizing student academic outcomes. Student socioeconomic status emerged as another significant predictor (IRR = 1.17), highlighting the intersection between disciplinary effectiveness and broader social determinants of educational success. The model results revealed that school-level factors played important roles in determining academic performance outcomes. School resource availability demonstrated a significant positive effect (IRR = 1.09), suggesting that well-resourced institutions were better positioned to implement effective discipline practices and support student achievement.

Interestingly, school size showed a negative relationship with performance ( $IRR = 0.93$ ), indicating that larger schools faced challenges in maintaining effective discipline and academic standards. Urban location provided a modest advantage ( $IRR = 1.10$ ), likely reflecting better access to progressive discipline training and support systems. The model's dispersion parameter of 0.142 confirmed that the negative binomial distribution was appropriate for handling the overdispersion present in the count data, providing reliable estimates of the relationships between discipline practices and academic outcomes.

**Table 4: Perceptions of Teachers and Students on Discipline Effectiveness**

Theme	Teachers (n=120)	Students (n=480)	Representative Quote
<b>Positive Discipline Benefits</b>	89 (74.2%)	324 (67.5%)	"When we use guidance instead of punishment, students open up and actually want to improve" (Teacher, Urban School)
<b>Fear-based Compliance</b>	67 (55.8%)	298 (62.1%)	"We behave because we're scared of being beaten, not because we understand what's right" (Student, Rural School)
<b>Improved Teacher-Student Relations</b>	78 (65.0%)	289 (60.2%)	"Counselling has helped me build trust with my students rather than being seen as the enemy" (Teacher, Mixed School)
<b>Reduced Motivation from Punishment</b>	71 (59.2%)	356 (74.2%)	"After being suspended, I felt like giving up on school completely" (Student, Rural School)
<b>Need for Training</b>	103 (85.8%)	-	"We need more training on how to handle discipline without using the cane" (Teacher, Rural School)
<b>Preference for Understanding</b>	-	387 (80.6%)	"I learn better when teachers explain why rules are important instead of just punishing us" (Student, Urban School)

The qualitative analysis revealed convergent perspectives between teachers and students regarding the superiority of positive discipline approaches, with 74.2% of teachers and 67.5% of students acknowledging the benefits of supportive disciplinary measures. Teachers consistently reported that guidance and counselling approaches led to more meaningful behavioural changes and stronger student relationships, as exemplified by one teacher's observation that "when we use guidance instead of punishment, students open up and actually want to improve." Students echoed these sentiments, with 80.6% expressing preference for approaches that helped them understand the rationale behind rules rather than simply imposing consequences. This alignment between educator and learner perspectives provided strong validation for the quantitative findings regarding the effectiveness of positive discipline practices. However, the data also revealed concerning patterns regarding punitive discipline impacts, particularly the prevalence of fear-based compliance reported by both teachers (55.8%) and students (62.1%). Students were more likely than teachers to recognize the demotivating effects of punitive measures, with 74.2% of students compared to 59.2% of teachers acknowledging that punishment reduced academic motivation. The qualitative data highlighted the psychological impact of harsh discipline through student testimonies such as "after being suspended, I felt like giving up on school completely," which illuminated the pathway through which punitive practices undermined academic performance. A critical finding was that 85.8% of teachers identified the need for additional training in positive discipline methods, particularly in rural schools where traditional punitive approaches remained entrenched, suggesting that capacity building could be a key intervention point for improving both discipline practices and academic outcomes.

### Discussion of Findings

The study's findings revealed a compelling narrative about the transformative power of positive discipline practices in Central Uganda's secondary schools, challenging long-held assumptions about the necessity of punitive measures for maintaining order. The quantitative evidence consistently demonstrated that schools employing guidance, counseling, peer mediation, and reward systems achieved significantly superior academic outcomes across all measured dimensions, from GPA and subject completion rates to student engagement and attendance. This pattern aligned with international research on positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), suggesting that the benefits of supportive discipline transcend cultural and geographical boundaries. The negative binomial regression results provided particularly robust evidence, showing that positive discipline practices were the strongest predictor of academic success even after controlling for socioeconomic factors, school resources, and location. These findings contradicted the traditional belief that strict punishment was necessary for academic discipline, instead revealing that fear-based approaches actually undermined the very outcomes they purported to enhance.

The stark urban-rural divide in discipline practices uncovered by this study highlighted systemic inequalities in educational approaches that perpetuated disparate academic outcomes for students based on their geographical location. Rural schools' persistent reliance on corporal punishment, suspension, and other exclusionary practices reflected not merely cultural preferences but structural constraints including limited training opportunities, inadequate resources for counseling services, and isolation from progressive educational reforms. The qualitative data revealed that rural teachers often recognized the limitations of punitive approaches but lacked the knowledge, skills, and institutional support necessary to implement alternatives effectively. This finding suggested that addressing discipline-related achievement gaps would require targeted interventions that acknowledged and addressed the unique challenges faced by rural educational institutions, including professional development programs, resource allocation adjustments, and policy implementation support systems.



The convergence of teacher and student perspectives on the superiority of positive discipline approaches represented a significant finding that could inform policy development and implementation strategies. The fact that both educators and learners recognized the benefits of supportive discipline while acknowledging the harmful effects of punishment created a foundation for sustainable reform efforts (Peter et al., 2023). However, the study also revealed important nuances, including the reality that many teachers continued to use punitive methods despite recognizing their limitations, often due to institutional pressures, time constraints, or lack of alternative strategies (Gracious, 2024; Hadijah & Ali, 2024; Victoria et al., 2023). The high percentage of teachers expressing need for additional training in positive discipline methods indicated a readiness for change that could be leveraged by policymakers and educational leaders. These findings suggested that successful discipline reform would require not only policy changes but also comprehensive capacity building, ongoing support systems, and institutional culture shifts that prioritized student wellbeing alongside academic achievement.

### **Conclusion**

This study conclusively demonstrated that discipline practices in Central Uganda's secondary schools operated as a double-edged sword, with positive approaches significantly enhancing academic performance while punitive measures undermined student achievement and engagement. The research provided compelling evidence that schools employing guidance, counseling, peer mediation, and reward systems consistently outperformed those relying on corporal punishment, suspension, and other exclusionary practices across all academic indicators examined. The negative binomial regression analysis confirmed that positive discipline was the strongest predictor of academic success, with students in supportive environments passing 18% more subjects than their counterparts in punitive settings. These findings challenged the prevailing assumption that strict punishment was necessary for maintaining order and academic standards, instead revealing that fear-based approaches created barriers to learning and reduced student motivation to succeed academically.

The study further revealed significant disparities in discipline practices between urban and rural schools, with rural institutions disproportionately relying on traditional punitive measures that negatively impacted student outcomes. The convergence of teacher and student perspectives on the superiority of positive discipline, combined with widespread recognition of the need for additional training in supportive approaches, indicated both the potential for and barriers to meaningful reform. The research established that effective discipline practices required more than policy mandates; they demanded comprehensive support systems, adequate resources, and sustained capacity building efforts, particularly in rural educational settings. These findings provided crucial evidence for policymakers, school administrators, and educators to reconsider existing discipline frameworks and prioritize approaches that simultaneously maintained order and nurtured academic excellence.

### **Recommendations**

#### **Implement Comprehensive Positive Discipline Training Programs**

Based on the study's finding that positive discipline practices significantly improved academic outcomes while 85.8% of teachers expressed need for additional training, the Ministry of Education and Sports should develop and implement mandatory comprehensive training programs in positive discipline approaches for all secondary school educators. These programs should focus particularly on rural schools where traditional punitive methods remain prevalent, providing teachers with practical skills in guidance and counseling, peer mediation, restorative justice practices, and positive behavioral interventions. The training should include ongoing support through mentorship programs, regular refresher courses, and the establishment of resource centers that provide continuous professional development opportunities to ensure sustainable implementation of evidence-based discipline practices.

#### **Establish School-Based Counseling and Support Services**

Given the study's evidence that guidance and counseling were associated with improved academic performance but were only available in 83.3% of schools overall and just 66.7% of rural schools, educational authorities should mandate the establishment of comprehensive counseling and support services in all secondary schools. This recommendation involves recruiting qualified school counselors, providing appropriate facilities and resources for counseling activities, and developing referral networks with community mental health services. Schools should be required to integrate counseling services into their discipline frameworks, ensuring that behavioral interventions prioritize understanding and addressing root causes of misconduct rather than merely imposing consequences, thereby supporting both behavioral improvement and academic achievement.

#### **Develop Context-Specific Policy Guidelines and Resource Allocation**

The study's revelation of significant urban-rural disparities in discipline practices and academic outcomes necessitates the development of context-specific policy guidelines that acknowledge the unique challenges faced by different school settings while maintaining consistent standards for student welfare and academic excellence. Educational policymakers should create differentiated implementation frameworks that provide additional resources, support, and flexibility for rural schools while establishing clear accountability mechanisms for all institutions. This includes developing rural-specific professional development programs, providing technology-enhanced training opportunities, establishing inter-school collaboration networks, and creating resource-sharing mechanisms that enable rural schools to access the tools and expertise necessary for implementing positive discipline practices effectively.

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