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Abstract
This study examined the association between low-achieving secondary school students' exposure to non-physical punitive discipline and their academic self-concept in Trans-Nzoia County, Kenya, where punishment remains a routine response to poor performance despite a thin local evidence base. Framed by self-determination theory and Shavelson's model of academic self-concept, the study used a cross-sectional, convergent parallel mixed-methods design; because it delivered no treatment and no repeated measurement, it reports associations rather than effects. From a population of 25,075 low-achieving students, 964 class teachers and 241 deputy principals, 384 students completed a five-point Likert questionnaire and 68 teachers and 34 deputy principals were interviewed. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and bivariate regression; interview data using reflexive thematic analysis. A statistically significant but weak positive association emerged between reported punishment and academic self-concept ($\beta = 0.311$, $R^2 = 0.097$), explaining under 10 per cent of the variance and running counter to the international literature; it is attributed mainly to a belief item carried in the predictor and to learners reading structured attention as care. The interview strand, in which teachers doubted the value of punishment, diverged from the survey and is treated as a substantive finding. The cross-sectional, unadjusted design and an unvalidated punishment measure preclude causal or directional claims. Schools should replace punitive responses to academic failure with private, behaviour-specific corrective feedback supported by school counselling.

Introduction

The beliefs that learners hold about their own academic ability, collectively termed academic self-concept, exert a powerful influence on achievement, persistence and school engagement (Huang, 2011). Learners who appraise themselves favourably invest greater effort and display resilience in the face of difficulty, whereas those who carry negative self-views tend to disengage, perpetuating a cycle of poor outcomes (Arens et al., 2021). Academic self-concept is best understood as a multidimensional, hierarchical construct in which subject-specific and general self-appraisals are organised under a broader sense of academic competence (Shavelson et al., 1976; Marsh & Shavelson, 1985). The classroom practices

of teachers, and in particular the disciplinary measures they employ, bear directly on these self-appraisals.

Across much of Sub-Saharan Africa, punishment continues to be a primary tool for addressing academic underperformance, despite growing evidence that questions its pedagogical value (Gershoff, 2017). Within school settings, punishment encompasses a range of aversive responses to undesirable behaviour: verbal scolding, withdrawal of privileges, detention, manual labour and public humiliation. Although corporal punishment was formally outlawed in Kenya in 2001 and the Basic Education Act of 2013 prohibits degrading treatment and directs schools towards guidance, counselling and positive-discipline alternatives (Republic of Kenya, 2013), a variety of non-physical punitive measures remain commonplace in secondary schools. In place of the banned cane, schools now rely on detention, manual work, withdrawal of privileges, exclusion from class and the public announcement of poor results, frequently directed at learners whose academic performance falls short of expectations. A paradox, therefore, sits at the centre of Kenyan school discipline: the Ministry of Education bans punitive treatment and promotes supportive counselling, yet schools continue to deploy psychological and quasi-physical punishments to drive up mean scores, with the burden falling on the very learners whose academic self-appraisals are already the most fragile.

A theoretical mechanism explains why this burden matters. Self-determination theory holds that motivation and a healthy self-concept depend on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs — competence, autonomy and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Punishment that is controlling and directed at the learner rather than the behaviour frustrates the need for competence and autonomy, teaching repeatedly punished low achievers that failure is fixed and effort futile, so that they internalise the punishment as a verdict on a permanent trait rather than as feedback on a temporary state. International scholarship documents this dynamic. Gershoff (2017), reviewing decades of work on school punishment, concluded that punitive practices reliably produce short-term compliance but undermine long-term motivation and self-perception. Gage et al. (2018) similarly found that teachers' classroom-management practices were associated with student engagement, and Skiba et al. (2014) linked exclusionary discipline to disengagement and marginalisation. A recent meta-analysis of 18 studies involving more than six million students found that the overall association between teacher punishment and academic achievement is negative but weak ($r = -.18$), a statistically detectable yet practically modest relationship (Li et al., 2026). Hattie and Clarke (2019) drew a practical distinction: the form of feedback matters more than its presence: corrective feedback that names specific behaviours and points to improvement tends to support learning, whereas reprimand directed at the learner as a whole tends to erode self-concept.

Nationally, the scale of secondary school underachievement is substantial: in the 2023 KCSE examination, only 201,133 of 899,453 candidates (22.36 per cent) attained the grade C+ threshold for direct university entry, while 48,174 (5.36 per cent) recorded the minimum grade of E (Ministry of Education, 2024). Trans-Nzoia County reflects this national pattern, with a large share of its candidates falling within the grade D+-and-below band that defines academic underachievement in the Kenyan system. It is this

underachieving band, rather than the broad below-C+ population, that constitutes the target group of the present study.

Academic underperformance in Kenyan secondary schools is both chronic and severe, and of 899,453 candidates in the 2023 KCSE examination, 373,231 (41.50 per cent) fell below the grade D+ pass threshold (Ministry of Education, 2024); Trans-Nzoia County mirrors this pattern. Confronted with these figures, schools frequently resort to punitive measures — verbal reprimands, detention, manual work, and the public announcement of poor results — as motivational levers, and many educators treat punishment as an indispensable disciplinary instrument, despite a thin evidence base regarding its effects on academic outcomes among struggling learners.

The paradox is sharper than a simple chain of poor performance followed by punishment. National policy bans punitive treatment and promotes guidance and counselling, yet schools persist in using psychological and quasi-physical punishment to achieve higher mean scores, and the cost is borne by low-achieving learners whose academic self-concept is already weak. Students subjected to repeated punishment for academic shortcomings risk developing a fixed conviction that their efforts are futile, a belief that erodes self-concept and deepens the cycle of underachievement. International and continental scholarship reports that the relationship between punishment and academic outcomes is at best weak and generally adverse (Gage et al., 2018; Li et al., 2026), but no Kenyan study has examined this association specifically among low-achieving secondary school learners; this constitutes the focus of the present study.

The study sought to establish the association between students' exposure to punitive discipline and the academic self-concept of low-achieving secondary school students in Trans-Nzoia County, Kenya. Specifically, it asked what level of punishment exposure low-achieving students report; what level of academic self-concept they hold; whether reported punishment exposure is associated with academic self-concept; and how teachers and deputy principals perceive the relationship between punishment and these learners' academic self-concept. Consistent with the cross-sectional design, the corresponding null hypothesis was that there was no statistically significant association between reported exposure to punishment and academic self-concept among low-achieving secondary school students in the county. The implications of the findings for disciplinary policy and school counselling are drawn out in the discussion and recommendations rather than pursued as a separate data-collection objective.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017) and in Shavelson's model of academic self-concept (Shavelson et al., 1976; Marsh & Shavelson, 1985). Self-determination theory supplies the explanatory mechanism. It proposes that learners' motivation and self-appraisals depend on the satisfaction of needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness, and that the social context — here, the school's disciplinary practice — either supports or frustrates those needs. The theory makes a distinction central to this study: structure (clear expectations and consistent, informative responses) can support competence when it is delivered with involvement and autonomy support, whereas controlling, person-directed punishment frustrates competence and autonomy and erodes self-

concept. This distinction is used analytically in the discussion to interpret why some forms of teacher response are read by learners as care while others are read as a verdict on ability. Shavelson's model supplies the structure of the dependent variable, treating academic self-concept as a multidimensional, hierarchical set of self-appraisals that can be measured through learners' endorsement of statements about their academic competence.

Methods

The study employed a cross-sectional, convergent parallel mixed-methods design. Quantitative and qualitative strands were collected in parallel and analysed separately, then brought together at the interpretation stage through a joint display (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Fetters et al., 2013). Because the design delivers no intervention and no repeated measurement, it supports statements of association rather than of effect, and all claims in this paper are framed accordingly.

Population and Sampling

The target population comprised all students performing at grade D+ or below, all class teachers, and all deputy principals in the 295 public secondary schools in Trans-Nzoia County. The accessible population comprised 25,075 low-achieving students, 964 class teachers, and 241 deputy principals. The sample size for the student survey was set at 384, the value indicated by the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table for a large population at the 95 per cent confidence level and a 5 per cent margin of error. The three participant categories were sampled by distinct procedures, as summarised in Table 1: schools were selected by stratified random sampling to mirror the county distribution of school categories; within the selected schools, low-achieving students were identified purposively against the grade D+-and-below criterion and then sampled; class teachers were selected purposively as those directly responsible for the identified classes; and deputy principals, who chair school disciplinary committees, were included by purposive census. Because low-achieving students were selected through a purposive eligibility criterion rather than a simple probability sample from the whole student body, statistical inference is limited to the population of low-achieving learners in the sampled schools and does not generalise to all secondary students in the county.

Questionnaires were distributed to 450 eligible students, and interview invitations were sent to 80 class teachers and all 40 deputy principals in the selected schools. After data cleaning, usable returns were obtained from 384 students, 68 class teachers and 34 deputy principals, corresponding to response rates of 85.3, 85.0 and 85.0 per cent, respectively. The achieved student sample of 384 matches the Krejcie–Morgan target.

Table 1: Sampling Procedure, Instrument and Achieved Sample by Participant Category

Participant category	Sampling procedure	Instrument	Distributed	Achieved
Low-achieving students	Stratified random selection of schools; purposive eligibility (grade D+ and below)	Likert questionnaire	450	384
Class teachers	Purposive (teachers of the identified classes)	Interview guide	80	68
Deputy principals	Purposive census (chairs of disciplinary committees)	Interview guide	40	34

Instruments, Validity and Reliability

The principal quantitative instrument was a five-point Likert questionnaire administered to the student sample. Section A captured demographic characteristics (sex, form level, school category, and type), and Section B contained the substantive items. The punishment subscale comprised seven items: six measuring exposure to punitive practices (reprimand for poor performance, extra work for incomplete assignments, detention, negative comments about ability, being sent out of class, and the public announcement of failures) and one belief item, "Punishment motivates me to work harder academically." The belief item is conceptually distinct from exposure, since it records an attitude rather than a reported experience, and it is reported separately in the results. The regression composite, however, was scored across the full subscale, as in the source analysis, a point taken up in the Limitations. Academic self-concept was measured by ten items reflecting learners' self-appraisals of academic competence. A semi-structured interview guide was administered to class teachers and deputy principals.

Content validity was established through expert judgement: the instruments were reviewed by educational psychology experts at Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, yielding a content validity index of 0.87, and their comments led to revisions and the addition of items. Content validity confirms that the items cover the intended domain; it does not, on its own, establish that the items form unidimensional constructs. The present study did not conduct exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis, and factorial (construct) validity therefore remains unestablished; this is acknowledged as a limitation, and factor-analytic validation of both subscales — reported with convergent and discriminant evidence — is recommended before the subscales are treated as measures of single constructs. Reliability is reported separately from validity: a pilot study with 30 respondents from a non-sampled school produced Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.81 for the punishment-exposure subscale and 0.86 for the academic self-concept subscale, indicating acceptable internal consistency. A high alpha indicates internal consistency only and is not evidence of validity.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations and percentages) and bivariate regression at the 0.05 level of significance. Because the model contains a single predictor, the dataset was screened for normality, linearity and homoscedasticity; multicollinearity does

not arise in a single predictor model and is therefore not reported. The model includes no covariates, so factors such as prior achievement and school climate remain uncontrolled and may confound the observed association; accordingly, the regression is interpreted as an unadjusted association rather than an effect, and all conclusions are limited to association. Qualitative data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021).

Reflexivity and Trustworthiness

Reflexive thematic analysis treats the researcher as an active instrument, so a positionality statement is in order. The interviews were conducted and coded by a researcher trained in educational psychology and familiar with Kenyan secondary schooling; this familiarity aided rapport and interpretation but also carried the risk of reading teachers' accounts through a prior expectation that punishment is harmful, a risk managed through reflexive memoing and by actively seeking accounts that did not fit that expectation. Coding proceeded through familiarisation, generation of initial codes, construction of candidate themes, review against the full dataset, and definition of final themes. Trustworthiness was supported by an audit trail of coded extracts, peer debriefing with a second educational psychology researcher, and the deliberate retention of disconfirming accounts. The qualitative findings reported below summarise the accounts of the 68 class teachers and 34 deputy principals who were interviewed.

Ethical Considerations

Because the student participants were minors classified as low-achieving and were questioned on a sensitive matter, ethical safeguards were essential. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology Institutional Scientific and Ethics Review Committee (MMUST-ISERC), Approval No. MMUST/ISERC/148/2025 (Ref. MMU/COR: 40312 Vol 6(01)), valid from 21 August 2025 to 21 August 2026, and a research licence was subsequently issued by the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI), Licence No. NACOSTI/P/25/4178969 (Ref. 538748), valid for the period ending 1 September 2026. The protocol approved by the committee included the informed consent and learner assent documents and the study instruments. Authorisation to access schools was granted by the Trans-Nzoia County Director of Education and the County Commissioner. Written parental or guardian consent and written learner assent were obtained before participation; participation was voluntary, responses were anonymised, and respondents were free to withdraw at any time.

Results

Level of punishment exposure

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the six punishment-exposure items, with the belief and affect items reported separately beneath. The criterion for endorsement is set at the scale midpoint of 3.00 rather than at 2.50, because on a five-point scale, the midpoint, not a value below it, marks the boundary between disagreement and agreement.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Punishment Exposure (N = 384)

S/N	Item	Mean	SD	Remark
1	Teachers reprimand me when I perform poorly	3.42	0.96	Endorsed
2	I am given extra work when I fail to complete assignments	3.28	0.94	Endorsed
3	I receive detention for poor academic performance	3.15	0.91	Endorsed
4	Teachers make negative comments about my abilities	2.95	0.99	Not endorsed
5	I am sent out of class for not doing homework	2.87	0.98	Not endorsed
6	My failures are announced publicly in class	2.68	1.02	Not endorsed
	Exposure composite (six items)	3.06	0.92	Marginal

Note. The exposure composite is the mean of the six exposure items. The punishment subscale also included one belief item, "Punishment motivates me to work harder academically" (M = 3.45, SD = 0.88), which measures an attitude rather than exposure; it is reported separately here. The full punishment composite, which includes this belief item, is 3.13 (SD = 0.92), and this full composite was used to estimate the regression in Tables 3–5. Re-estimation on the six exposure items alone is discussed under Limitations.

The exposure composite of 3.06 (SD = 0.92) sits just above the scale midpoint, indicating that low-achieving learners report a moderate and ambivalent level of exposure to punitive discipline. Reprimand for poor performance (M = 3.42) was the most commonly reported practice, while the public announcement of failures (M = 2.68) and being sent out of class (M = 2.87) fell below the midpoint and were the least endorsed. The belief item that punishment motivates harder work attracted the highest single rating (M = 3.45). Because this is an attitude rather than a report of exposure, it is analysed below as a likely source of the positive association rather than as evidence that punishment is experienced as motivating.

Level of academic self-concept

The composite mean for academic self-concept was 3.27 (SD = 0.85), above the scale midpoint but within the moderate band. This indicates that the academic self-beliefs of low-achieving learners in the sample are tentatively positive but not firmly established, a reading consistent with their history of underperformance.

Association between punishment exposure and academic self-concept

The null hypothesis was tested using bivariate regression at the 0.05 level. Results are presented in Tables 3, 4 and 5. The predictor here is the full punishment composite (M = 3.13), which includes the belief item; re-estimation on the six exposure items alone, together with factor-analytic validation of the subscale, is required to confirm the pattern and is set out in the Limitations section.

Table 3: Model Summary

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. Error
1	.311	.097	.094	.80912

Note. Predictor: (Constant), Punishment.

Table 4: Analysis of Variance

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	26.743	1	26.743	40.851	.000
Residual	250.054	382	.655		
Total	276.797	383			

Note. Dependent variable: Academic self-concept.

Table 5: Regression Coefficients

Model	B	Std. Error	β	t	Sig.
(Constant)	2.378	.142		16.746	.000
Punishment	.287	.045	.311	6.391	.000

Note. Dependent variable: Academic self-concept.

The model returned R = 0.311 and R^2 = 0.097, indicating a weak positive association in which reported punishment accounts for 9.7 per cent of the variance in academic self-concept. The association is statistically significant ($F(1, 382) = 40.851$, $p < .001$; $\beta = 0.311$, $t = 6.391$, $p < .001$), so the null hypothesis of no association is rejected. Because the design is cross-sectional and the model is unadjusted, the coefficient reflects the strength and sign of an unadjusted association rather than a causal effect; the direction of any underlying relationship is not determinable from these data, and the small adjusted R^2 (.094) indicates limited explanatory power. The positive sign is examined in the discussion.

Teacher and deputy-principal perceptions

The interview strand, drawing on the 68 class teachers and 34 deputy principals who participated, pointed in a different direction from the survey. Reflexive thematic analysis of the accounts yielded three themes: the limited motivational impact of punishment, its capacity to damage academic identity, and an institutional shift away from punitive approaches.

Limited motivational impact. Teachers repeatedly observed that punishment seldom improved how struggling learners viewed themselves, even where it secured compliance. As one put it, "These students are already struggling. Punishing them for poor grades makes them feel worse about themselves, not better" (Teacher 7, School C). Another linked persistent punishment to persistent failure: "I have noticed that the students I punish the most are often the same ones who continue to perform poorly. Punishment does not seem to change their self-belief" (Teacher 14, School J).

Damage to academic identity. Several participants described how public and labour-based punishments tell low-achieving learners that they are defined by failure. One teacher reflected, "When you send a student

to dig the garden during maths class, you are sending them a message that their hands matter more than their head. They start to believe it" (Teacher 19, School N).

Institutional shift. Deputy principals described deliberate moves away from punitive discipline. One stated, "We have moved away from harsh punishment because we realised it was not helping our weak students improve. It was just making them hate school" (DP 3, School F); another described the substitution directly: "We now give corrective assignments rather than manual labour. It keeps the student academically engaged and sends a different message about what we expect from them" (DP 11, School L).

A minority of teachers defended a limited, carefully bounded role for punishment. One held that a warning or mild punishment "can shake a student out of complacency, but it must be used sparingly and with care" (Teacher 11, School E); another insisted that punishment must be paired with support, since "punishment alone leaves them hopeless" (Teacher 19, School N). These disconfirming accounts were retained rather than smoothed over; they qualify rather than overturn the dominant view that punishment does little to build struggling learners' academic self-concept.

Discussion

The quantitative analysis returned a statistically significant but weak positive association between reported punishment and academic self-concept ($\beta = 0.311$, $R^2 = 0.097$). This sign is the opposite of what the international literature reports: Gershoff (2017) and Gage et al. (2018) found that punitive and exclusionary discipline undermine motivation and self-perception, and a recent meta-analysis reported a weak but statistically significant negative association between teacher punishment and academic achievement ($r = -.18$; Li et al., 2026). The earlier draft of this paper claimed consistency with that literature; that claim was mistaken because a positive coefficient cannot be consistent with findings with a negative direction. The honest task is therefore to explain the positive sign rather than to assert harm.

Three explanations are advanced. The first, and most plausible, is methodological. The punishment composite used in the regression carried a belief item ("Punishment motivates me to work harder academically") alongside the six exposure items. This item drew the highest rating of any in the subscale ($M = 3.45$), and the source analysis itself cautioned that the response may reflect social desirability or learned compliance rather than experience. Learners who endorse the belief that punishment helps are also likely to report higher academic self-concept, so the composite captured an attitude as much as an exposure, and this is the most likely source of the positive coefficient. The six-item exposure composite ($M = 3.06$) is lower than the full composite ($M = 3.13$), and re-estimation of the exposure items alone, after factor-analytic validation, is required to determine whether the positive association persists. The second explanation follows from self-determination theory: in resource-constrained schools where teacher attention is scarce, structured disciplinary contact, even when nominally punitive, may be read by some learners as attention that signals the teacher's investment, partially supporting relatedness and competence. The third is statistical: with no covariates, prior achievement and school climate could act as confounders or suppressors (MacKinnon et al., 2000), so the 9.7 per cent of variance may be partly spurious.

The qualitative strand diverges from the survey, and that divergence is itself a finding rather than a flaw. Teachers reported that punishment had limited motivational impact and could damage academic identity, and described schools moving away from punitive discipline, whereas the survey returned a weak positive association. Table 6 sets the two strands side by side. The meta-inference is that the survey most likely registers the belief item together with a minority reading of structured attention as care, while the interviews capture the professional judgement that punishment does not help struggling learners. Read together, the strands neither confirm harm nor endorse punishment; they converge on the conclusion that the form of correction matters more than whether it occurs, consistent with Hattie and Clarke (2019).

Table 6: Joint Display of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Quantitative finding	Qualitative finding	Relationship	Meta-inference
Weak positive association (β = 0.311); exposure composite rated marginal (M = 3.06)	Teachers report punishment has limited motivational impact and can damage academic identity; schools shifting away from punitive discipline	Divergent	Survey likely reflects a belief item carried in the predictor plus a minority "attention as care" reading; interviews reflect professional judgement that punishment does not aid learning
Public shaming and exclusion least endorsed (M = 2.68; 2.87)	Public shaming drew the most negative accounts	Convergent	Public, person-directed punishment is experienced as an attack on academic standing

Statistical significance is not educational significance: punishment exposure explains under a tenth of the variance in academic self-concept, so a disciplinary policy built on it rests on very little.

Implications for Disciplinary Policy and School Counselling

Read through self-determination theory; a school's disciplinary policy teaches a lesson of its own: person-directed reproof teaches that ability is fixed and effort pointless, while behaviour-focused support teaches that competence can grow. Three implications follow. First, school managers should recognise that disciplinary policy shapes academic self-concept as much as behaviour, and should audit practice to remove public, person-directed punishment of academic failure. Second, school counsellors should be drawn closer to the disciplinary life of the school, the better to intervene with individual low-achieving learners and to advise teachers. Third, where correction is unavoidable, it should be conducted in private, directed at specific behaviours rather than at character, and paired with clear guidance on how to improve.

Conclusion

This study examined the association between exposure to punitive discipline and the academic self-concept of low-achieving secondary students in Trans-Nzoia County. It found a statistically significant but weak positive association (β = 0.311, R^2 = 0.097), most plausibly attributable to a belief item included

in the punishment composite and a minority reading of structured attention as care, rather than to any benefit of punishment. The interview strand, in which teachers doubted the value of punishment, diverges from the survey; the two converge only on the conclusion that the form of correction matters more than its mere presence. On this basis, the following recommendations are offered. First, schools should curtail punitive responses to academic underperformance, especially public and person-directed forms, and redirect disciplinary resources towards supportive, behaviour-focused correction. Second, where correction is unavoidable, it should be private, behaviour-specific and accompanied by guidance, and teacher preparation should distinguish constructive correction from punishment. Third, school counsellors should be integrated into the school's disciplinary life and work with teachers and managers to support low-achieving learners. Fourth, subsequent studies should re-validate the punishment measure through factor analysis, add covariates such as prior achievement and school climate, and adopt longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs capable of establishing direction and effect.

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