

Effect of Marital Conflict on the Academic Performance of Day Public Primary and Secondary School Students in Moshi Municipality, Tanzania

Jacqueline G. Tibamanyisa¹

Moshi Municipal Council, Tanzania

Johnson M. Rugoye²

Directorate of Library Services, Moshi Co-operative University (MoCU), Tanzania

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Abstract

Marital conflict is a significant stressor with potential repercussions for children's academic attainment. This study examined its effect on the academic performance of day public primary and secondary school students in Moshi Municipality, Tanzania. A correlational research design was employed, with data collected from 200 respondents via questionnaires. Data were analyzed using multiple regression. The study revealed a high prevalence of marital conflicts, primarily driven by communication breakdowns, financial strain, insecurity, and alcohol use. Regression analysis indicated that communication gaps ($p < 0.001$), parental disagreements over schooling support ($p < 0.001$), logistical issues like transport ($p < 0.001$), and general neglect of school needs ($p < 0.001$) significantly impaired academic performance. Direct conflict manifestations, including parental fighting ($p < 0.001$) and arguing ($p < 0.001$) had strong negative effects like school absence ($p < 0.001$), divorce/separation ($p < 0.001$), and deprivation of basic needs ($p < 0.001$). Alcohol use was linked to domestic violence ($p < 0.001$), severe financial consequences ($p < 0.001$), parental neglect ($p < 0.001$), and a devaluation of education ($p < 0.001$). The study concludes that marital conflicts exert a profoundly negative impact on students' academic performance. Also, it is recommended that parents be encouraged to seek counselling services to resolve conflicts and that school administrations develop frameworks to intervene supportively in students' family conflicts.

Keywords: Academic Performance, Marital Conflict, Students, Moshi Municipality, Tanzania, Family Dynamics

Introduction

Marital conflict represents a critical psychosocial stressor with demonstrable negative consequences for child development and academic attainment globally (Brown et al., 2018; Karim et al., 2016). These conflicts, often stemming from financial strain, communication breakdowns, infidelity, and substance abuse, disrupt family stability and create a home environment characterized by emotional insecurity and neglect, which can severely impede a child's capacity to learn (Gopakumar & Johns, 2017; Davies & Cummings, 1994). In the Tanzanian context, rapid urbanization, economic pressures, and evolving social norms have intensified marital strife, as evidenced by rising divorce rates reported by the Registration, Insolvency and Trustee Agency (RITA, 2025) and high prevalence of intimate partner violence (Luoga et al., 2025).

While the detrimental effects of family dynamics on children's psychological well-being are well-documented in existing literature (Kavindi et al., 2024; Buberwa, 2014; Matem, 2023), a significant research gap persists. Previous studies have often focused broadly on child development or psychosocial outcomes without establishing a clear, localized, and empirical link between specific dimensions of marital conflict and measurable academic performance metrics among day students. These students are particularly vulnerable as they traverse between the stressful home environment and school daily, yet they lack the buffer of a boarding school structure. Therefore, this study seeks to bridge this gap by specifically examining the effect of marital conflicts on students' academic performance of day public primary and secondary school students in Moshi Municipality, Tanzania. The findings aim to provide targeted evidence for policymakers, educators, and social workers to design effective intervention strategies. The research objectives included determining the leading factors for marital conflicts in Moshi Municipality, examining the prevalence of marital conflicts in Moshi Municipality, and identifying the effect of marital conflicts on the academic performance of day public primary and secondary school students in Moshi Municipality

Theoretical Literature Review

This study is anchored by two complementary theoretical frameworks that elucidate the pathways through which marital conflict affects child outcomes

Emotional Security Theory (EST)

The theory, developed by Davies and Cummings (1994), highlights how parental conflict affects a child's well-being and development. Considering the theory, Davies, Martin, and Sturge-Apple (2016) established that children exposed to interparental and family conflict are at greater risk for developing mental disorders. Emotional insecurity is a unique and robust mediator of multiple pathways involving family adversity and children's adjustment problems. Studies by Merrilees et al. (2019) and Papp, Kouros, and Cummings (2019) examined children's reactions to interparental conflict.

Destructive interparental conflict (e.g., hostility, aggression, unresolved disputes) threatens this security, triggering emotional dysregulation, hypervigilance, and cognitive preoccupation with family threats. This constant state of alertness depletes the cognitive resources necessary for concentration, memory, and academic engagement, directly leading to poorer school

performance (Xuesi, Jingya, & Melfang, 2021; Sturge-Apple et al., 2022). A study by McCloskey et al (2019) on gender inequality and intimate partner violence among women in Moshi found that 21% of women reported having experienced intimate partner violence (i.e., having been threatened with physical abuse, subjected to physical abuse or forced into a sexual relationship); 26% reported such an experience, which affect children's educational development.

Social Cognitive Learning Theory (SCLT)

This theory by Vygotsky's Social Cognitive Learning Theory (1978) postulates that social interaction is fundamental to cognitive development. Certainly, this theory integrates cognitive, behavioural, and environmental influences, making it a key agenda in psychology and significant for education. Marital conflict provides a model of dysfunctional interpersonal relationships, poor conflict resolution (e.g., aggression, withdrawal), and maladaptive coping mechanisms (e.g., substance use). Children from high-conflict homes may internalize these behaviors, exhibiting them in school settings through aggression with peers, withdrawal from classroom activities, or reduced academic self-efficacy, further hindering their learning and social integration (Giallo et al., 2022; Band et al., 2019).

Trotter et al. (2019) noted that when married couples start quarrelling, they often spend less time caring for their children and withdraw from social networks. As a result, school-age children are likely to lose their parents' love and cooperation, contributing to a lack of support for schooling. A study by Agbor et a. (2024) on parental conflict and academic performance found that divorce, childbearing, external pressure, financial problems, and communication breakdown negatively affect students' academic performance.

Together, these theories provide a robust framework: EST explains the internal, emotional toll that disrupts cognitive function, while SCLT explains the external, behavioral outcomes that affect academic engagement.

Empirical Literature Review

A substantial body of empirical evidence, both global and local, corroborates the negative impact of marital conflict on children's wellbeing and educational outcomes. The mechanisms are multifaceted and often interlinked.

Meta-analyses and studies from the Global North have established strong correlations between interparental conflict and a range of adverse outcomes. These include lower GPA and standardized test scores (Supol et al., 2020), deficits in executive function and working memory crucial for learning (Gustafsson et al., 2013), and higher rates of school dropout. The work of Cummings and colleagues has been pivotal in showing that conflict properties matter; destructive patterns involving verbal aggression, physical hostility, and unresolved tension are far more damaging than constructive disagreements (Cummings & Davies, 2010). The negative effects are not merely correlational but are often mediated by the emotional insecurity and cortisol stress responses identified in EST (Sturge-Apple et al., 2022).

Research across Sub-Saharan Africa reveals similar patterns, albeit within distinct socio-economic and cultural contexts. Studies in Nigeria have linked marital conflict stemming from infidelity and economic pressure to poor social development and academic performance in primary school children (Ijoyah et al., 2022). In Kenya, research in Nakuru County confirmed a direct connection between family disputes and lower educational attainment, often exacerbated by economic hardship (Maina, 2020). A significant regional factor is the practice of bride price, which can create power imbalances and financial pressures that trap women in abusive relationships, indirectly affecting children's welfare (UN Women, 2023). Furthermore, polygynous family structures have been associated with more mental health and social problems for children compared to monogamous families (Al-Sharfi, Pfeffer, & Miller, 2015).

Within Tanzania, the literature paints a concerning picture that directly informs this study. Research in Ilala and Kinondoni municipalities has documented how broken households and divorce lead to low student motivation, emotional problems, and poor academic performance due to financial hardship and a lack of parental care and supervision (Buberwa, 2014; Malinda, 2017). A critical study in Dar es Salaam by Materu (2019) directly linked marital disputes to children being pushed onto the streets, with half of the street children citing parental alcoholism and frequent disputes as primary causes. Nationally, the high prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) estimated at 38.9% among women of reproductive age (Luoga et al., 2025) and an alarming divorce rate (RITA, 2025) indicate a widespread issue of family instability. Alcohol consumption is consistently identified as a key trigger for IPV and marital breakdown (Moshia, Akiyoo, & Ezekiel, 2018; Kazungu & Byaro, 2023).

However, a precise gap remains. While these studies establish the link between conflict and broad developmental or social outcomes, there is a lack of focused, mixed-methods research that quantitatively measures the academic performance of day students (who are highly vulnerable to daily home stressors) and qualitatively explores the specific mechanisms, such as the inability to pay for transport or school materials as facilitated by marital conflict in a specific urban setting like Moshi. This study aims to fill this gap by providing granular, empirical evidence from Moshi Municipality, connecting the theoretical frameworks to tangible educational metrics.

Methodology

This study was conducted in Moshi region, Tanzania employing a correlation research design to examine the impact of marital conflict on student academic performance. Quantitative data were collected via structured close-ended questionnaires from a population of 200 respondents, comprising (100 students, 71 parents, 4 social welfare officers, and 25 teachers) selected through cluster sampling. Two phases of data analysis were carried out, to include multiple regression analysis used to find significant correlations between important variables after descriptive statistics (percentages and frequencies), which indicated occurrence of marital conflicts. In line to data analysis, Lee (2022), noted that regression analysis helps to explore the relationships among variables, predicting an outcome, or the subject of a hypothesis test. In this study, the researcher adopted a multiple linear regression model, which contributed to computing the estimated magnitude and direction (positive/negative) of the relationship between each independent variable and the dependent variable (Frost, 2024).

In addition, the blend of traditional Chagga culture with modern urban influences in Moshi creates unique family dynamics, contributing to marital conflicts, which affect children's academic outcomes due to less parenting practices. Children exposed to frequent marital conflict often show poorer executive functioning, which is crucial for academic tasks requiring focus, organization, and working memory (Alphonse, Binamungu, and Bakta, 2022). Increasingly, as a tourist hub, Moshi's seasonal economy may create financial stress that exacerbates marital conflict and its educational impacts on children. Indeed, severe marital conflict may result in children missing school or dropping out entirely, undermining their academic achievement.

Findings

Prevalence of Marital Conflict

The study respondents were asked to identify their experience with marital conflicts. Results in Table 3 indicated that 52.5% of the respondents agreed that they had experienced marital conflicts, while 47.5% did not agree with the concept. It implies that the majority of respondents were aware of the prevalence of marital conflicts in either their households or in the surrounding environment. This rate of responses similarly denotes that the students from the surveyed schools were likely to be exposed to frequent marital disputes, which aggravate psychological issues about academic performance.

Table 1: Experience with marital conflicts

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	105	52.5%
No	95	47.5%
Total	200	100.0

Source: field data, 2025

Leading factors of marital conflict

The leading contributing factors were identified as: Alcoholism (30%): Cited as a primary cause of financial mismanagement and domestic violence. Economic Shortcomings (25%): Financial strain was a major source of arguments and neglect. Communication Breakdown (20%): Lack of positive communication exacerbated misunderstandings and resentment. Large Family Size (25%): Stretched financial and caregiving resources, increasing household stress.

Table 2: Causes of marital conflicts

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Alcoholism	60	30%
Economic shortcoming	50	25%
Communication gap	40	20%
Large family size	50	25%
Total	200	100.0

Source: Field data, 2025

Impact on academic performance

Multiple regression analysis revealed statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) negative effects across all measured dimensions of marital conflict:

Communication breakdown

The regression results in Table (9) reveals that negative parental communication patterns significantly disrupt household calmness, which is vital for children’s academic performance, with parents never talking positively showing the strongest detrimental effect ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$), followed closely by the father's silence toward the mother ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$). While these conflict factors show robust statistical significance ($p < 0.001$), parents sharing problems demonstrates a weak protective effect ($\beta = -0.15$, $p = 0.012$), suggesting open dialogue may partially mitigate household tension. The model explains 28% of the variance in calmness (McFadden's $R^2 = 0.28$), with all predictors statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

Table 3: Causal effect of the communication gap on students’ academic

Predictor	Coef. (β)	Std. Error	p-value	Sign.
Parents never talk positively	0.52	0.08	<0.001	***
Father never talks to Mother	0.48	0.07	<0.001	***
Parents share problems	-0.15	0.05	0.012	*

Source: Field data (2025)

Financial strain

The regression results in Table 11 reveals that all parental quarreling factors significantly harm children's education (all $p < 0.001$), with complete lack of school support showing the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$), followed by transport barriers ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$) and late fee payments ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$). General neglect of school needs ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$) and lack of encouragement ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$) also demonstrate statistically strong impacts. The model explains 31% of variance (McFadden's $R^2 = 0.31$), with predictors statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

Table 4: Causal effect of financial strain on students’ academic performance

Predictor	Coef. (β)	Std. Error	t-value	p-value	Sign.
Never support	0.58	0.09	6.44	<0.001	***
No transport	0.41	0.07	5.86	<0.00	***
Late fee payment	0.38	0.06	6.33	<0.001	***
Rarely meet school needs	0.29	0.05	5.80	<0.001	***
No encouragement	0.32	0.06	5.33	<0.001	***

Source: Field data, 2025

Direct violence and emotional distress

The regression results in Table 13 reveals that parental conflicts significantly reduce study motivation, with both fighting ($\beta = -0.42$, $p < 0.001$) and arguing ($\beta = -0.38$, $p < 0.001$) showing strong negative effects, while the mother crying ($\beta = -0.31$, $p = 0.001$) has a slightly weaker but still significant impact. In contrast, maternal care ($\beta = +0.12$, $p = 0.047$) exhibits a small yet positive influence, suggesting it partially mitigates the detrimental effects of household conflict on education.

Table5: Causal effect of violence on students’ academic performance

Variable	Coef. (β)	Std. Error	t-value	p-value	Sign.
Intercept	4.25	0.18	23.61	<0.001	***
Parents always fight	-0.42	0.09	-4.67	<0.001	***
Parents always argue	-0.38	0.07	-5.43	<0.001	***
Mother cries	-0.31	0.08	-3.88	0.001	**
Mother always cares	+0.12	0.06	2.00	0.047	*

Source: Field data (2025)

Insecurity and instability

Regression results in Table 15 reveal that all four variables significantly impact students’ academic performance ($p < 0.05$), with school absence showing the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$) on students’ academic performance. Family-related factors, such as divorce/separation ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$) are also highly significant impacting students’ academic performance, while lacking basic needs ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$) significantly affects students’ academic performance

($\beta=0.35$, $p<0.001$); and low concentration ($\beta=0.22$, $p=0.001$) has a smaller but still statistically significant impact on students' academic performance.

Table 6: Causal effect of insecurity on students' academic performance

Predictor	Coef. (β)	Std. Error	P-value	Sign.
Intercept	-1.80	0.25	<0.001	***
Divorce/separation	0.42	0.08	<0.001	***
Lacking basic needs	0.35	0.07	<0.001	***
Low concentration	0.22	0.06	0.001	**
School absence	0.48	0.09	<0.001	***

Source: Field data, 2025

Alcohol use

Regression results in Table 17 demonstrates that all alcoholism-related factors are statistically significant predictors of household dysfunction (all $p < 0.001$). Domestic violence exhibits the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.51$, $p<0.001$), financial consequences are also highly significant, with high income expenditure ($\beta = 0.42$, $p<0.001$) and poor financial management ($\beta = 0.35$, $p<0.001$) showing substantial impacts. Child welfare concerns are equally critical, as both parental neglect ($\beta = 0.38$, $p<0.001$) and devaluation of education ($\beta = 0.29$, $p<0.001$) show strong, statistically significant associations. The model explains 29% of variance (McFadden's $R^2 = 0.29$), establishing these factors as key intervention targets, with domestic violence being the most urgent priority, followed by financial strain and child welfare issues.

Table 7: Causal effect of alcohol use on students' academic performance

Predictor	Coef. (β)	Std. Error	t-value	P-value	Sign.
High-income expenditure	0.42	0.07	6.00	<0.001	***
Drunk parents never care	0.38	0.06	6.33	<0.001	***
Domestic violence	0.51	0.08	6.38	<0.001	***
Poor financial management	0.35	0.06	5.83	<0.001	***
Value education	0.29	0.05	5.80	<0.001	***

Source: Field data, 2025

Discussion of findings

The findings of this study strongly affirm the theoretical propositions of Emotional Security and Social Cognitive Learning theories while providing granular, context-specific insights into the academic ramifications of marital conflict in Moshi.

The high prevalence of conflict (52.5%), driven primarily by alcoholism and economic hardship, creates a home environment lacking of the emotional security as cited by Davies & Cummings (1994) to be crucial. This directly manifests in academic neglect, as confirmed by the regression analysis which showed that financial strain led to a failure to support schooling ($\beta = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$) and provide transport ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$). This finding aligns with global studies on poverty and education (Wething & Bivens, 2024) and specifically with Tanzanian research on resource allocation in stressed households (Buberwa, 2014).

Furthermore, the results demonstrate that direct exposure to conflict through parental fighting ($\beta = -0.42$, $p < 0.001$) and arguing ($\beta = -0.38$, $p < 0.001$) corrodes a child's sense of security, leading to the emotional dysregulation and cognitive preoccupation predicted by EST. This internal turmoil translates into an inability to concentrate in school, a finding consistent with studies linking family stress to impaired executive function (Gustafsson et al., 2013). Through the lens of SCLT, children model this aggressive and hostile behavior, potentially explaining observations of social and behavioral problems in school that further disrupt learning (Giallo et al., 2022).

The role of alcohol as a key aggravating factor is critical in the study as its strong association with domestic violence ($\beta = 0.51$, $p < 0.001$) and financial waste ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$) encapsulates a dual crisis: it simultaneously models destructive behavior (SCLT) and devastates the material and emotional foundations of the home (EST). This confirms earlier findings in the Tanzanian context on alcohol-related neglect (Kumar, 2019; Omachare, 2020).

Finally, the most severe outcomes, school absence ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$) and dropout are the ultimate consequence of this multifaceted assault on a child's life. They represent the point where the cumulative burden of logistical neglect, psychological distress, and family instability (e.g., divorce) completely overwhelms a child's capacity to engage with education, echoing concerns raised by local studies on street children in Dar es Salaam (Materu, 2019).

Conclusion

This study provides compelling and nuanced evidence that marital conflict is a pervasive and critical determinant of academic underperformance among day public school students in Moshi Municipality, Tanzania. The findings affirm that the negative impact is not a simple correlation but operates through a complex web of direct and indirect pathways. Financial conflicts lead to tangible material deprivation, denying students essential resources like textbooks, transportation, and fees. Concurrently, the emotional and psychological turmoil generated by constant exposure to arguing, violence, and alcohol abuse erodes the cognitive and emotional capacity necessary for learning, as predicted by Emotional Security Theory. Furthermore, children learn and replicate the negative behaviors modeled in their home environment, leading to social and behavioral issues in school that further impede academic integration, in line with Social Cognitive Learning Theory. The culmination of these stressors manifests in the most severe outcomes like chronic absenteeism and ultimately, school dropout, which permanently derail a child's educational trajectory. Indeed, addressing the academic challenges faced by students in Moshi requires a paradigm shift that recognizes the classroom as an extension of the home. Effective educational interventions must therefore be holistic, addressing the deep-seated familial conflicts that spill over into the schoolyard and the classroom, ultimately determining a child's chance for a successful future.

Implications

Theoretical Implications

The study strongly validates the integrated application of Emotional Security Theory and Social Cognitive Learning Theory in a non-Western, urban Tanzanian context. It demonstrates that these frameworks are not only complementary but essential for fully understanding the dual internal-cognitive and external-behavioral mechanisms through which family dysfunction translates into academic failure.

Practical Implications for Educators and Schools

To effectively mitigate the impact of economic hardship on students, schools must adopt a holistic, supportive approach that includes training teachers to move beyond an academic-only focus and identify early warning signs of distress, such as sudden academic decline, absenteeism, or behavioral changes enabling timely intervention; this necessitates establishing accessible, on-site psychosocial support and counseling services to provide a critical safe haven for affected

students; furthermore, schools must proactively build stronger parent-school partnerships, creating open communication channels not just for academic reporting but to offer guidance and community resource referrals, framing the entire effort as an essential collaboration to support the child's overall well-being.

Policy Implications

Addressing the ripple effects of marital conflict on children requires a multi-faceted policy approach that includes developing integrated, community-based family support services through local government and NGOs, which combine marital counseling, conflict mediation, and parenting training within existing social welfare frameworks; simultaneously, policies must focus on the root cause by promoting economic empowerment and poverty alleviation to directly mitigate a primary trigger of instability. Building upon this foundation, targeted public health campaigns are needed to address specific secondary triggers like alcohol abuse and reduce the stigma around seeking help, while concurrently strengthening and adequately funding formal child protection systems, including police gender desks, to ensure they can effectively respond to incidents of domestic violence and neglect.

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