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### The Gendered Parenting Dynamics: A Qualitative Inquiry into Pre-Service Teachers' Academic Adjustment in South-western Uganda

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#### Keywords:

Parenting,  
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Teachers.

This study explores the influence of gendered parenting dynamics on the academic adjustment of pre-service teachers in South-western Uganda. A qualitative design utilising secondary thematic analysis was employed, drawing from focus group discussions with 44 pre-service teachers and interviews with 28 parents and 8 university administrators. The findings reveal a complex interplay of familial and institutional factors. Authoritarian parenting, sharply divided along gendered lines with fathers as distant disciplinarians, often hindered the development of student autonomy. This was compounded by experiences of neglect and financial hardship, which paradoxically served as both a significant barrier to performance and a powerful motivator for "academic proving." Furthermore, students faced systemic institutional challenges like poor timetabling. Despite these obstacles, students demonstrated agency through peer support and skill development. The study concludes that academic adjustment in this context is a negotiation between entrenched familial patterns, socioeconomic pressures, and institutional barriers. It necessitates a multi-stakeholder, ecosystem approach. Recommendations include parental sensitisation, pedagogical reforms, enhanced student counselling, and government action to foster a more supportive educational ecosystem for pre-service teachers.

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## INTRODUCTION

The transition to higher education represents a critical period of academic and psychosocial adjustment, during which students must navigate newfound independence and increased academic demands (Holliman et al., 2022; Owusu-Agyeman & Mugume, 2023). Among pre-existing factors, familial background and parenting dynamics play a foundational role in shaping this adjustment (Gana et al., 2023; Gill et al., 2023). From the outset, our research was guided by the conviction that the family unit is a primary socialising agent, and its influence must be critically examined within the specific transition to tertiary education. Extensive research, predominantly from Western contexts, establishes a link between parenting styles, authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful and developmental outcomes (Alicia, 2018; Sanvictores & Mendez, 2021). However, the uncritical application of these typologies to non-Western settings can be problematic, as parenting is deeply embedded within specific cultural, economic, and social fabrics (Green et al., 2024; Ren et al., 2023). We posited that a meaningful investigation in the Ugandan context required moving beyond these imported frameworks to understand locally constituted meanings and practices. In Uganda, like many Sub-Saharan African nations, familial structures are influenced by collective values (Asiimwe et al., 2024), socioeconomic pressures, and distinct gendered expectations, necessitating context-specific inquiry (Ikwaru et al., 2024).

Within Uganda, parenting dynamics are increasingly recognised as significant for educational outcomes (Balikoowa et al., 2023; Siu et al., 2024). Patriarchal norms often cultivate gendered roles, where fathers are frequently perceived as authoritarian disciplinarians, while mothers bear primary caregiving burdens (Babu et al., 2024). As researchers, we were particularly

interested in how these prescribed roles translated into differential impacts on students' academic journeys, hypothesising that the gender of the parent might be as significant as the parenting style itself. These dynamics extend into the academic arena, influencing students' motivation, resilience, and adaptation to university life (Kwarikunda et al., 2023). For pre-service teachers, understanding this interplay is doubly important, as their own educational experiences may shape their future pedagogical approaches (Duchesne et al., 2025). This study is therefore situated at a critical junction, seeking to inform both student support and teacher training paradigms.

Despite this, a significant gap remains in understanding the precise mechanisms through which these gendered parenting dynamics affect the academic adjustment of university students in specific regional contexts like South-western Uganda. Much existing literature focuses on secondary schools or examines barriers in isolation (Akatwijuka, 2024). We identified a lack of qualitative, multi-stakeholder research that simultaneously captures the voices of students, parents, and administrators to build a holistic picture (Achankeng et al., 2023). This study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by investigating how gendered parenting dynamics, interacting with institutional structures, influence the academic adjustment of pre-service teachers in South-western Uganda.

## Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to qualitatively explore the gendered dynamics of parenting and their impact on the academic adjustment of pre-service teachers in South-western Uganda, providing a contextualised understanding that moves beyond Western-centric parenting models.

## Problem Statement

Pre-service teachers in Southwestern Uganda demonstrate persistent difficulties in academic adjustment to university life (Atibuni & Olema, 2024; Owusu-Agyeman & Mugume, 2023), yet the specific role of culturally-constituted gendered parenting dynamics in shaping this adjustment remains inadequately understood (Bashaija et al., 2022; Odaga, 2020). Existing research, largely rooted in Western parenting models, often overlooks the intricate interplay of authoritarian paternal roles, maternal caregiving burdens, and complex family structures characteristic of this context (Green et al., 2024; Ren et al., 2023). Consequently, there is a critical lack of contextualised understanding necessary to develop effective support systems (Sweeney, 2016). This study addresses this gap by investigating how gendered parenting dynamics in Southwestern Uganda impact the academic adjustment of pre-service teachers, providing evidence for culturally-attuned interventions that can enhance both student success and teacher training quality.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Adjustment

Academic adjustment is a multifaceted process of adapting to university demands (Lan et al., 2024). Tinto's (1993) Model of Student Departure emphasises the significance of academic and social integration for persistence. Complementarily, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory posits that development is shaped by interconnected environmental systems. From this perspective, a student's adjustment is influenced by the microsystem (e.g., family), the mesosystem (connections between family and university), the exosystem (institutional policies), and the macrosystem (cultural norms) (Akram et al., 2022). This study is guided by these integrated frameworks, viewing adjustment as an outcome of dynamic interactions between a student's familial

background and the institutional environment within a specific cultural context. We found this ecological lens essential, as it discourages a narrow focus on individual student deficits and instead directs attention to the systemic interactions that shape their experience.

### *Parenting Styles: Global Perspectives and Cultural Mediation*

Diana Baumrind's typology of parenting styles serves as a foundational framework (Alicia, 2018). While authoritative parenting (high responsiveness and demandingness) is often linked to positive outcomes in Western research, its cross-cultural applicability is contested (Oburu, 2020). In non-Western contexts, behaviours labelled "authoritarian" may be perceived as necessary strictness, motivated by specific cultural and socioeconomic realities (Ren et al., 2023). This underscores the need to examine parenting within its cultural context rather than applying universal typologies. Our analysis was therefore cautious not to presuppose the negative connotation of authoritarianism but to explore its local meaning and function.

### *Gendered Parenting Dynamics in the African Context*

Within many African societies, parenting is deeply gendered, reflecting patriarchal family structures (Kabongo & Malose, 2023; "Negotiating Patriarchy and Gender in Africa," 2021; Okelo et al., 2022; Wadende et al., 2022). Fathers are often socialised to be authoritative breadwinners and disciplinarians, a role that can manifest as emotional distance and strict, fear-based control (Gebresilase et al., 2025; Huang et al., 2018; Kabongo & Malose, 2023). Mothers, conversely, are typically assigned the role of primary caregivers and nurturers, responsible for the day-to-day emotional and practical support of children (Gaunt et al., 2024; Hwang, 2025). This gendered division of labour creates distinct relational dynamics between children and each parent, which can have differentiated impacts on a student's psychological preparedness for the

independence and challenges of university life (Gill et al., 2023; Sax & Weintraub, 2014; Yao et al., 2022). These dynamics can significantly influence pre-service teachers' academic adjustment, as paternal strictness might foster discipline while maternal nurturing could facilitate emotional resilience (Benedetto & Ingrassia, 2018; Jain & Sharma, 2024).

### ***Parenting Styles and Student Outcomes in Uganda***

Recent studies conducted in Uganda underscore the significant influence of parenting on educational outcomes (Kwarikunda et al., 2023; Noel et al., 2021). Studies have found that authoritarian parenting, while intended to instil discipline, can correlate with higher levels of anxiety and fear of failure among students, potentially hindering the development of autonomous learning skills (Biirah & Anika, 2018; Muhwezi & Kiyangi, 2024; Onyango, 2015). Conversely, neglectful or disengaged parenting has been linked to profound emotional distress and poor adjustment, as students lack both the financial safety net and the emotional scaffolding necessary to navigate university challenges (Johansen et al., 2023; Morales-Castillo, 2022). This suggests that both overly controlling and insufficiently involved parenting styles present unique risks to student adjustment.

### ***The Role of Financial Hardship and Familial Motivation***

Socioeconomic status is a powerful determinant of educational access and success (Purnamasari et al., 2022; Solinís et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2022). In Uganda, financial hardship creates a significant barrier, as poverty can lead to a scarcity mindset, impairing cognitive function and academic performance (Atibuni & Olema, 2024; Mahuro & Hungi, 2016). However, the narrative is not solely one of deficit. For some students, witnessing parental struggle becomes a powerful motivator, a phenomenon termed familial motivation (Ansong et al., 2017; Xiaoqiong & Li, 2022). This drive to succeed academically to alleviate family hardship

or to validate parental sacrifice can foster remarkable resilience, illustrating the paradoxical role of economic adversity as both a barrier and a catalyst (Alisyahbana et al., 2025; Othman et al., 2021; Yan & Gai, 2022).

### ***Complex Family Structures and Institutional Barriers***

The increasing prevalence of complex family structures, including single-parent and child-headed households, adds another layer to the adjustment process (Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023; Fokaidou & Loizidou, 2019). This can be a source of significant stress but also forge resilience (Tangco-Siason, 2025). Students from single-mother households often face compounded economic and emotional pressures (Escañan et al., 2025; Otiliah et al., 2025; Rees et al., 2023). While this can be a source of significant stress, it can also forge resilience, with students developing a strong sense of responsibility and determination to succeed against the odds (Tangco-Siason, 2025). The absence of a father figure can also create complex emotional landscapes that students must navigate, impacting their self-perception and coping mechanisms (Culpin et al., 2022; Dickerson, 2014; Jacobs & Andrews, 2021). Furthermore, the quality of family relationships and the emotional ties between parents and children profoundly influence a student's university experience, with strong parental support correlating with higher academic self-perception (Flanagan-Bórquez & Soriano-Soriano, 2024).

Furthermore, the institutional environment itself is a critical factor (Achankeng et al., 2023). Universities in Uganda and across Sub-Saharan Africa face challenges related to mystification, underfunding, and inadequate infrastructure (Akatwijuka, 2024; Bantjes, 2023). Students frequently report systemic hurdles such as overcrowded lectures, irrelevant curricula, poor timetabling, and limited access to learning resources (Kipchumba, 2019; Mohamedbhai, 2014). These institutional deficiencies act as a "second shock," exacerbating the difficulties

students bring from their home environments and creating a misalignment between student needs and institutional support (Freudenberg & Crutchfield, 2025; Smit, 2012). Universities in Sub-Saharan Africa face challenges related to massification and underfunding, leading to systemic issues like overcrowding and poor timetabling (Muyingo, 2017; Tumuheki et al., 2021). These deficiencies act as a "second shock," exacerbating difficulties from the home environment. Our research design intentionally included administrators' perspectives to capture this institutional dimension and its interaction with familial backgrounds.

### ***Student Agency and Peer Support as Coping Mechanisms***

Despite these challenges, students are not merely passive recipients of their circumstances (Ellis & Johnston, 2022; Hitches et al., 2024). They actively employ strategies to facilitate their adjustment, demonstrating significant agency. The deliberate development of independence skills, such as time management and communication, is a common adaptive response (Fadlallah et al., 2025; Kwarikunda, 2020). Furthermore, the strategic formation of peer networks for academic and emotional support is a crucial coping mechanism (Feraco et al., 2022; Lin et al., 2024). These peer associations provide a buffer against institutional and familial shortcomings, embodying the social integration that Tinto (1993) identified as vital for persistence (Beals et al., 2021; Wangrow et al., 2021).

### ***The Imperative for a Multi-Stakeholder Approach***

The complexity of factors influencing academic adjustment necessitates a multi-stakeholder approach to support (Ajayi et al., 2021; Lan et al., 2024). Isolated interventions are unlikely to succeed. As suggested by Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), effective support requires synchronised action across different systems. This includes sensitising parents to modern support strategies (Ding et al., 2025; Su-

Russell & James, 2021), reforming university pedagogy and student support services (Isiko, 2022; Kibanja, 2019), and advocating for government policies that address systemic funding and equity issues (Bashaija, 2021).

### **Conceptual Framework and Research Gap**

Guided by Tinto's (1993) and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theories, this study posits that academic adjustment is an outcome of the dynamic interaction between a student's familial background (microsystem) (Fonseca-Bolorin, 2022; Winterer et al., 2020) and the institutional environment (mesosystem/exosystem), all situated within the broader cultural context of Southwestern Uganda (macrosystem) (Girmay, 2017; Schulzetenberg et al., 2020). While existing literature touches on parenting, finances (Adewuyi, 2023; Fennie et al., 2020) and institutional barriers separately, a significant gap remains in the qualitative, multi-stakeholder exploration of how gendered parenting dynamics specifically interface with these other factors to shape the adjustment of pre-service teachers in this specific region.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, the academic adjustment of pre-service teachers is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by a confluence of familial, economic, and institutional forces. The unique gendered expression of parenting styles within the Ugandan context, combined with pervasive financial hardships and specific institutional challenges, creates a distinct ecology of adjustment that demands further investigation. This study aims to contribute a nuanced, context-specific understanding of these interlocking dynamics, providing evidence to inform holistic support strategies for future educators in Southwestern Uganda.



## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative design based on secondary thematic analysis of existing datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The original data were collected between November 2024 and March 2025 for a broader project, containing extensive discussions on family background and university experiences, making them suitable for this analysis. We selected this method for its power to generate rich, nuanced insights into the participants' lived experiences and subjective meanings.

### Data Sources and Participants

Data were synthesised from four universities (three public, one private) in South-western Uganda, combining insights from: Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): 44 pre-service teachers (purposively selected), Semi-structured Interviews: 28 parents (recruited through students) and Semi-structured Interviews: 8 university administrators (Deans/Heads of Department). We believed triangulating these three perspectives was crucial for constructing a holistic and credible understanding of the adjustment ecosystem.

### Data Analysis Procedure

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process. After familiarisation, initial codes were generated manually and then later with the assistance of NVivo 12. Codes were collated into potential themes, reviewed, and refined. Inter-coder reliability was established on a 20% sample, and data saturation determined the final sample size. The final themes are grounded in the data. Throughout this process, we remained reflexive, constantly comparing emerging themes against the raw data to ensure they faithfully represented the participants' voices.

## Ethical Considerations

Approval was obtained from Mbarara University of Science and Technology (Reference: MUST-2024-1680). The original study secured informed consent, including permission for future analysis. For this study, confidentiality was maintained using institutional codes and by omitting all personally identifiable information. We considered the ethical re-use of this data paramount, ensuring no harm could come to participants from our secondary analysis.

## FINDINGS

The analysis revealed a complex interplay between parenting, family background, and academic adjustment. We have organised the findings into five key themes, which we have named as follows: The Gendered Architecture of Authoritarian Parenting, The Double-Edged Sword of Neglect and Complex Family Structures, Financial Hardship as Paradoxical Engine, The Institutional Quagmire, and Pathways and a Blueprint for Ecosystemic Support.

### The Gendered Architecture of Authoritarian Parenting

A dominant finding was authoritarian parenting, sharply divided along gendered lines. As Table 1 shows, the "Imposed Rules & Fear" sub-theme had a high occurrence (12). Fathers were consistently portrayed as intimidating, distant figures. One student stated, *"My father is a dictator... He makes his rules and wants to implement them as he will"* (CD8). Another described fear-enforced compliance: *"Dad being the toughest of all... you greet, and you go back to your bedroom"* (CD13). This limited the communication and autonomy crucial for a university. A nuanced sub-theme, "Strict but Logical/Academic Focus" (8 occurrences), showed rules perceived as logical and academically focused: *"Everything was kept logical, strict and specific... My father mostly put emphasis on academics"* (CD3).

Parent interviews partially reframe this authoritarianism through a lens of values and principles. Parents emphasised *"discipline and morality,"* with one stating the core principles are *"Respect, time management and discipline"* (Table 2). This suggests that what students experience as arbitrary control is often perceived by parents, especially fathers, as deliberate moral and behavioural training. The parental sub-theme of "Hard work and self-reliance" ("Education for self-reliance") and "Respect and integrity" further indicates that strictness is frequently intended to foster independence and ethical character, goals that students feel the parenting style undermines. The parent data reveals that this "architecture" is built on a foundation of intended virtue, even if its lived experience is one of constraint.

Administrators (Table 3) confirmed the impact, noting that strict parenting *"may cause anxiety and fear of failure"* (Q1-R1), creating a mismatch with university demands. As researchers, the stark, gendered language used by participants to describe paternal authority was immediately striking, confirming our hypothesis that fatherhood and motherhood were constructed in distinctly different, and often oppositional, terms within the family power structure.

### The Double-Edged Sword of Neglect and Complex Family Structures

Many students experienced financial and emotional neglect, the most cited sub-theme (15 occurrences) under permissive/neglectful parenting (Table 1). This led to profound distress: *"My parents... do not bother about my life, so I struggle with myself to get the fees... I'm a very sad person"* (CD4). Concurrently, complex family structures (9 occurrences) presented a duality. While a source of emotional distress, they also served as powerful motivation: *"I always look at my mum as a source of motivation... I see her struggling all the time"* (CD14).

This student's experience of neglect stands in direct contrast to the strong parental emphasis

on "Love and support" as a key value, described as "Love for education and raising self-driven children" (Table 2). This triangulation highlights a critical gap: parental expressions of love and support are often operationalised as broad encouragement or religious/spiritual guidance, *"I guide her to go to Church and listen to the word of God"*, which may not be perceived as tangible, emotional support by students navigating daily crises. The parents' primary identified role as a financial and academic provider, *"Payment of school fees/tuition"*, "I buy them reading materials like textbooks", may further widen this emotional gap, especially when financial support is itself unstable. Families are thus complex systems where intent (love, support) and impact (feelings of neglect) can dramatically diverge.

Administrators highlighted that students from such backgrounds often need targeted *"psychosocial support"* (Q6-R8, Table 3). We were deeply moved by the raw emotional weight in these narratives of neglect, but also noted the analytical importance of not framing these students solely as victims; their capacity to draw strength from adversity was a critical part of the story.

### Theme Three: Financial Hardship as Paradoxical Engine

Financial hardship was a central, paradoxical factor (14 occurrences, Table 1). It was a significant barrier linked to poor performance: *"This life has affected students to lower their academic performances... when she doesn't have money for herself, she falls sick"* (Code 12). Administrators identified a stark *"digital divide"* for rural students (Q3-R4, Table 3). Conversely, minimal support became a potent motivator: *"The low funding... motivates them to work hard so that they can impress their parents"* (Code 14). This "academic proving" was also reflected in statements like, *"Life with a single mum has taught me hustling... it has helped me work harder"* (CD16). This theme powerfully validated our initial interest in the dual role of poverty; the data clearly showed that scarcity

could simultaneously crush and catalyse, a complexity we felt was essential to capture.

Parents unequivocally identified "Payment of fees and tuition" as their foremost form of academic support, with one stating their support is simply *"Payment of school fees/tuition"* (Table 2). The "Provision of scholastic materials" (*"I buy them reading materials like textbooks"*) was the second most cited form of support. This triangulation confirms that financial provision is the core transactional contract in the parent-student educational pact.

### The Institutional Quagmire

Students faced formidable systemic barriers, with "Systemic & Logistical Challenges" being the most frequently cited hindrance (21 occurrences, Table 1). They criticised oppressive timetabling (*"four exams a day. No breathing space"*), inadequate resources, and irrelevant pedagogy (*"some lecturers give irrelevant content"*). These deficiencies compounded familial struggles. Listening to these accounts, we reflected on how the university, ostensibly a place of support and opportunity, was often experienced by students as an additional source of stress and obstruction, effectively amplifying the challenges they brought from home.

Notably, parental interviews revealed minimal direct commentary on institutional structures. Their focus remained almost exclusively on the home-based support they provide and their child's personal responsibility, as encapsulated in their values of *"discipline," "guidance on study habits,"* and *"Helping with homework and planning"* (Table 2). This absence is a significant triangulation point. It suggests that parents may be largely unaware of the institutional challenges their children face, potentially attributing academic struggles solely to individual failing or a lack of familial discipline.

### Pathways and a Blueprint for Ecosystem Support

Despite challenges, students demonstrated resilience. They developed independence skills (11 occurrences, Table 1) and leveraged peer support: *"It depends on the people you are associating with... [Good friends] can help you to read"* (CD62). Their proposed solutions (10 occurrences) explicitly called for a multi-stakeholder approach: sensitising parents (CD76), pedagogical reform (CD77), government intervention (CD77), and proactive use of guidance and counselling (CD61). This aligns with administrator strategies like early warning systems (Q9-R3, Table 3).

Parents demonstrated clear openness to being part of a supportive ecosystem, evidenced by their active involvement in "Guidance on study habits", *"I advise them on good study habits and planning"*, and "Helping with homework and planning" (Table 2). This shows an existing model of academic involvement that could be extended into the university years with proper channels and sensitisation. The strong parental emphasis on discipline, morality, and love provides a constructive entry point for university-led dialogue. We found this theme particularly significant, as it moved beyond describing problems to outlining solutions directly from the stakeholders, providing a compelling, evidence-based roadmap for intervention that resonated strongly with our theoretical framework.

### Conclusion of Findings

The findings reveal a fundamental disconnect between parental intentions, often rooted in values of discipline and self-reliance, and the lived experiences of students, who navigate control, neglect, and hardship. Financial support, while primary for parents, operates as a paradoxical force that both burdens and motivates. Critically, parents remain largely unaware of the institutional barriers that amplify these familial challenges, leaving students to face a compounded



"quagmire" alone. However, the shared values of hard work and success provide a foundation for constructive dialogue. Therefore, effective support requires an ecosystem approach that bridges these perceptual gaps, sensitises parents to university realities, and leverages their engagement as partners in student success.

## DISCUSSION

This study reveals academic adjustment not as a linear outcome of individual resilience, but as a complex product of dynamic and often contradictory interactions across the student's ecosystem. By triangulating data from students, parents, and university administrators, we move beyond simplistic cause-and-effect models to uncover a landscape where intentions clash with impacts, barriers coexist with catalysts, and systemic failures amplify pre-existing vulnerabilities. The following discussion synthesises the five key themes within the frameworks of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory and Tinto's (1993) Model of Student Departure, while engaging with extant literature to contextualise and explain the findings.

### The Gendered Architecture of Authoritarian Parenting

The finding that authoritarian parenting is sharply gendered, with fathers primarily enacting strict, fear-based discipline, aligns strongly with literature on patriarchal family structures in African contexts (Kabongo & Malose, 2023; Okelo et al., 2022). Students' descriptions of fathers as "dictators" (CD8) resonate with research framing paternal roles as distant disciplinarians and breadwinners (Gebresilase et al., 2025; Huang et al., 2018). However, triangulation with parent data adds critical nuance, reframing this "authoritarianism" through a lens of cultural values. Parents framed their strictness as instilling "discipline and morality," "respect, and time management" (Table 2), goals congruent with the "strict but logical/academic focus" sub-theme identified by some students.

This supports Oburu's (2020) and Ren et al.'s (2023) contention that parenting styles must be interpreted within their cultural and socioeconomic context, where strictness may be perceived as necessary training for survival and success.

The critical divergence, and a key contribution of this study, lies in the mesosystem disconnect between this culturally rooted parenting logic and the demands of the university microsystem. As administrators noted, such parenting "may cause anxiety and fear of failure" (Q1-R1), creating students ill-prepared for the autonomy and critical engagement required in higher education (Biirah & Anika, 2018; Muhwezi & Kiyangi, 2024). Thus, while the parental intent within the family microsystem may be virtue-oriented, the impact on the student's transition to the university microsystem is often inhibitory. This mismatch can hinder the academic and social integration Tinto (1993) deems essential, as fear-based compliance does not foster the self-regulated learning or proactive help-seeking needed for university success.

### The Double-Edged Sword of Neglect and Complex Structures

The profound emotional and financial neglect reported by students presents a stark contrast to the parental value of "Love and support" (Table 2). This triangulation exposes a significant intent-action-impact gap. Parents operationalised love and support as broad encouragement, religious guidance, and primarily, financial provision ("Payment of school fees/tuition"). For students, however, the absence of tangible, emotional, and consistent engagement translated into feelings of abandonment and profound sadness ("I'm a very sad person" - CD4), consistent with findings on the detrimental effects of neglectful parenting on adjustment (Johansen et al., 2023; Morales-Castillo, 2022).

Paradoxically, complex family structures, often a source of this neglect, also functioned as a powerful motivator, a finding mirrored in

literature on familial motivation and resilience (Ansong et al., 2017; Tangco-Siason, 2025). Students drew strength from witnessing a parent's struggle (CD14). This duality underscores the non-linear nature of adjustment, where a risk factor in one domain (emotional distress) can become a protective factor in another (academic drive). It also highlights student agency, as they actively constructed meaning and purpose from adversity. Administrators' recognition of the need for targeted "psychosocial support" (Q6-R8) points to the exosystem role of the institution in bridging this emotional gap, providing the scaffolding that the family microsystem, despite its intentions, could not.

### **Financial Hardship as Paradoxical Engine**

Triangulation firmly establishes financial provision as the core transactional pact in the parent-student educational relationship. Parents unequivocally identified fee payment as their primary support role (Table 2), while students experienced financial scarcity as both the most significant barrier and, at times, the most potent motivator. This confirms the dual role of poverty noted in Ugandan and broader literature (Atibuni & Olema, 2024; Mahuro & Hungi, 2016; Othman et al., 2021).

The barrier is systemic: hardship impairs performance directly and through the "digital divide" (Q3-R4), a macro- and exosystemic issue of resource distribution. Conversely, "academic proving" (Code 14), working hard to impress parents or alleviate future family burden, emerges as a powerful familial motivator (Xiaoqiong & Li, 2022). This paradox illustrates how the same mesosystemic link (family financial pressure) can simultaneously strain the student's academic integration (through stress and scarcity) and reinforce their commitment to persistence. The student's lived experience of this paradox is where the crushing weight and catalytic potential of poverty intersect.

### **The Institutional Quagmire**

Students' experiences of oppressive timetabling, inadequate resources, and irrelevant pedagogy depict the university not as a supportive mesosystem bridge but as an amplifying exosystem that exacerbates microsystem vulnerabilities. This finding aligns with critiques of higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa concerning massification and underfunding (Akatswijuka, 2024; Muyingo, 2017). The most critical triangulation here is the absence of parental awareness of these institutional barriers. Parents remained focused on home-based discipline and personal responsibility, potentially misattributing academic struggles to individual failing rather than systemic failure.

This creates a dangerous triple bind: the student navigates familial challenges (control or neglect), confronts institutional obstacles, and then faces potential misunderstanding at home for difficulties stemming from these very obstacles. The institution, in this model, fails to fulfil its mesosystem responsibility to effectively liaise with and educate families, leaving students isolated in a "quagmire" of compounded stress (Freudenberg & Crutchfield, 2025).

### **Pathways and Blueprint for Ecosystem Support**

The proposed solutions from students and administrators converge on a multi-stakeholder, ecosystemic approach, strongly validating the application of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory. Students called for sensitising parents, pedagogical reform, and better counselling (CD61, CD76, CD77). Administrators proposed early warning systems (Q9-R3). Crucially, parent data reveals a foundation for this collaboration: they are already engaged in "guidance on study habits" and value involvement (Table 2).

This triangulation provides a clear blueprint. The path forward requires active mesosystem engineering. Universities must: Develop structured programs to sensitise parents to the

realities of university life, pedagogical demands, and institutional challenges, moving beyond the purely financial transaction. Frame support initiatives around shared values (discipline, hard work, success) identified by parents, transforming their authoritarian or distant role into one of informed partnership. Heed student critiques by rationalising assessments, improving resources, and making pedagogy relevant, thereby reducing the institutional amplification of stress. Officially recognise and support the peer networks that students naturally develop, while strengthening professional psychosocial and academic counselling services.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

### Conclusion

This study concludes that the academic adjustment of pre-service teachers in South-western Uganda is a complex negotiation between entrenched familial dynamics and institutional barriers. The Gendered Architecture of Authoritarian Parenting, often characterised by paternal intimidation, limits autonomy. This is compounded by the Double-Edged Sword of Neglect and Complex Family Structures and Financial Hardship as a Paradoxical Engine, which function as both debilitating stressors and powerful motivators for "academic proving." Students navigate this while confronting the Institutional Quagmire, yet demonstrate resilience through Pathways, building peer support. The journey is one of navigating mismatches across ecological systems.

### Implications

Theoretically, the study challenges the universal application of Western parenting typologies, demonstrating their gendered, culturally mediated nature. It affirms the utility of an ecological framework for understanding adjustment as a systemic, rather than individual, phenomenon.

Practically, the data calls for a multi-stakeholder response, as outlined in the participants' blueprint:

Parents: Require sensitisation on holistic student support to bridge the developmental mismatch. Universities: Must reform pedagogy, timetabling, and strengthen counselling services to mitigate institutional shocks and support student agency. Government: Should intervene to create equitable support systems and address macro-level infrastructural challenges.

### Recommendations

University Administration: Review timetabling/assessment practices. Establish sensitisation workshops for lecturers on student-centred methods and expand accessible psychosocial services focused on the identified stressors of financial anxiety, familial pressure, and academic stress.

Educational Policymakers: Develop and fund national parental sensitisation programmes. Create equitable funding models and infrastructure grants to address the resource disparities between rural and urban students, as highlighted by administrators.

### Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study is limited by its qualitative focus on pre-service teachers in one region. Future research should: a) use mixed-methods to quantify parenting style prevalence and its statistical correlation with performance metrics; b) conduct multi-regional comparisons across Uganda to explore variations in parenting dynamics and adjustment challenges; c) undertake longitudinal studies to track how these adjustment patterns evolve throughout students' university careers and into their professional teaching practice.

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## APPENDIX

**Table 1: Thematic Content Analysis of Parenting Styles and Academic Adjustment of Pre-Service Teachers.**

Theme	Sub-Theme	Quote Occurrence	Findings Summary	Illustrative Quotations
<b>Authoritarian Controlling</b>	<b>&amp;Imposed Rules &amp;12 Fear</b>		Parents impose strict, non-negotiable rules on education and life choices, often inducing fear and limiting communication.	"My father is a dictator... He makes his rules and wants to implement them as he will." (CD8) "My mother dictated that you must join a government university... I contested the idea. But I felt bad." (CD3) "Dad being the toughest of all... The man could come, you greet, and you go back to your bedroom." (CD13)
	<b>Strict but Logical /8 Academic Focus</b>		Parenting is characterised by clear, logical rules with a strong emphasis on academics as the primary path to success.	"Everything was kept logical, strict and specific... My father mostly put emphasis on academics because he felt it was the fastest path to success." (CD3) "They advise me that I should put everything like, like taking education as a decision, because this is a dynamic world." (CD11)
<b>Permissive, Neglectful &amp; Inconsistent</b>	<b>Financial &amp;15 Emotional Neglect / Mistrust</b>		Parents are disengaged, unresponsive to financial needs, and provide little guidance, leading to student struggles.	"My parents... do not bother about my life, so I struggle with myself to get the fees... I'm a very sad person." (CD4) "There is mistrust and bias that parents have towards their children... they negatively respond to them." (CD3) "You find someone is at campus but is ever depending on friends... surviving on black tea for a week." (CD 5)
	<b>Complex Family9 Structures</b>		Growing up in single-parent or guardian-led households is a source of both motivation and potential emotional distress.	"I'm a single mother child... My mum would beat me, and whenever she would beat me I would feel like really it's because I don't have that [a father]." (CD12) "I grew up with someone, and she encourages me that even girls can make it in life." (CD3) "I've grown up with a step mom... who has been very supportive... it's hard to know that she's not my mom." (CD12)
<b>Factors Hindering Adjustment</b>	<b>Systemic Logistical Challenges &amp;21</b>		Adjustment is hampered by institutional issues like poor timetabling, inadequate resources, corruption, and heavy workloads.	"The timetable... four exams a day. No breathing space." (Audience) "There is hunger... the interval between one lecture to another lecture is 10 to 15 minutes...but the timetable does not show any breathing space" (CD61) "Some lecturers give irrelevant content." (Audience)
	<b>Factors Facilitating Adjustment &amp;11 Skills Development &amp; Peer Influence</b>		(forStudents develop crucial independence skills. Peer associations can foster Resilience/Skills)	"Effective communication... here in university it's different because if you don't have this phone, there is no way you're going to know." (CD49)

			healthy academic competition and support.	"It depends on the people you are associating with... [Good friends] can help you to read." (CD62) "It has taught me how to be economical... the little I am provided with I have to utilise it efficiently." (CD15)
<b>Impact of Financial Hardship</b>	<b>Dual Role as Barrier and Motivator</b>	14	Poverty can lower performance and cause stress, but minimal support can also motivate students to work harder to prove themselves.	"This life has affected students to lower their academic performances... when she doesn't have money for herself, she falls sick." (CD12) "The low funding or the minimal needs motivate them to work hard so that they can impress their parents." (CD14) "Life with a single mum has taught me hustling at a young age... it has helped me work harder." (CD16)
<b>Multi-Stakeholder Solutions</b>	<b>Targeted Interventions</b>	10	Solutions require action from parents (sensitisation), the university (improved pedagogy), the government (equitable support), and students (proactive engagement).	"Sensitise those parents and those guardians on how to support the university student." (CD76) "Lecturers should employ new teaching methods." (CD77) "Government should come out and intervene and assist." (CD77) "How it can be solved is through guidance and counselling." (CD61)

**Table 2: Interviews with Parents on the University Academic Journey of Their Children**

Theme	Sub-Theme	Compelling Quote	Key Insights
<b>Parental Values and Principles</b>	Emphasis on discipline and morality	"Respect, time management and discipline"	Discipline and moral guidance are central to parenting approaches, shaping student behaviour.
	Religious/spiritual guidance	"I guide her to go to Church and listen to the word of God"	Spirituality is a key motivator for some parents in reinforcing values.
	Hard work and self-reliance	"Education for self-reliance"	Parents prioritise independence, linking education to future self-sufficiency.
	Respect and integrity	"Respect and honesty"	Ethical behaviour is emphasised alongside academic success.
	Love and support	"Love for education and raising self-driven children"	Emotional support is seen as crucial for motivation.
<b>Academic Support Provided</b>	Payment of fees and tuition	"Payment of school fees/tuition"	Financial support is the most frequent form of parental academic assistance.

Theme	Sub-Theme	Compelling Quote	Key Insights
	Provision of scholastic materials	<i>"I buy them reading materials like textbooks"</i>	Access to learning resources is a major parental concern.
	Guidance on study habits	<i>"I advise them on good study habits and planning"</i>	Parents actively shape study routines.
	Helping with homework and planning	<i>"I support them in doing homework and holiday work"</i>	Direct involvement in academics varies but is present.
	Home schooling (rare)	<i>"I homeschool my children"</i>	Alternative education methods are uncommon but exist.

**Table 3: Interviews with University Administrators on the Experiences with Pre-Service Teachers**

Theme	Subtheme	Compelling Quotes	Key findings
<b>Influence of Parenting Styles</b>	Strict vs. Relaxed Effects	<i>"Strict parenting may cause anxiety and fear of failure." (Q1-R1)</i>	Cultural expectations of discipline may conflict with student mental health needs.
	Authoritative vs. Neglectful	<i>"Authoritative parenting produces well-adjusted students." (Q1-R3)</i>	"Middle-ground" parenting aligns best with university demands.
	Cultural/Socioeconomic Factors	<i>"Rural students take longer to adapt to urban campus life." (Q6-R5)</i>	Geographic origin shapes adjustment timelines.
<b>Family Background &amp; Barriers</b>	Financial/Digital Divides	<i>"Rural students face a digital divide—computer literacy programs help." (Q3-R4)</i>	Infrastructure limitations exacerbate pre-existing inequalities.
	Trauma & Psychosocial Support	<i>"Students from conflict zones need psychosocial support." (Q6-R8)</i>	Historical trauma requires institutional healing spaces.
<b>University Intervention Strategies</b>	Early Warning Systems	<i>"Mid-semester evaluations flag at-risk students." (Q9-R3)</i>	Data-driven identification prevents late-stage crises.
	Academic/Emotional Remediation	<i>"Counselling services are critical for stress-induced burnout." (Q7-R3)</i>	Holistic support systems reduce attrition rates.