

Awareness of Various Forms of Child Abuse: Pupils' Attributions – A Case Study of Gomadoda Cluster

Thembinkosi Tshabalala¹ --- Mufunani Tungu Khosa²

¹Lecturer and National Programme Leader for the Master of Education in Educational Management in the Faculty of Arts and Education at the Zimbabwe Open University

²Senior Lecturer and National Programme Leader for the Bachelor of Education in Educational Foundations in the Faculty of Arts and Education at the Zimbabwe Open University

Abstract

Until quite recently, children had very few rights with regards to protection from abuse by adults and still continue to do so in many parts of the world. Child abuse can take many forms. The four main types are physical, sexual, and psychological and neglect. Child abuse is a complex phenomenon with multiple causes. Child abuse is an international phenomenon. Many children who have been abused in any form develop some sort of psychological issues. These issues may include anxiety, depression, eating disorders, co-dependency or even a lack of human connections. There is also a slight tendency for children who have been abused to become child abusers themselves. In western countries, preventing child abuse is considered a high priority and detailed laws and policies exist to address this issue. In Zimbabwe, laws on children are meant to protect the safety and welfare of the child in every household. Apparently, at national level, Zimbabwe has progressive child-protection instruments, the main one being the Children's Protection and Adoption Act (Children's Act). Other subsidiary instruments including the [National Plan \(1999\)](#) and the [Orphan Care Policy \(1999\)](#) promote the overall protection of the rights of children. The New Constitution of Zimbabwe provides and guarantees an expanded bill of rights to children (0 – 18 years) and youths (15 – 18 years). Chapters 2, 19, 20, 25 and 27) and recognises the existence and role of child-centred non-governmental organisation (NGOs) and networks through memorandums of understanding with parent ministries of the Government of Zimbabwe. However, the crisis that enveloped Zimbabwe over the past few years, have compromised the extent to which children can enjoy basic rights. In view of the above, this study set out to investigate the awareness levels of school children about the various forms of child abuses perpetrated against them. The population consisted of all the pupils of Gomadoda cluster in Nkayi District. The sample consisted of 30 pupils selected using random sampling. Data were generated by means of semi-structured interviews using an interview guide. The study revealed that pupils were not aware of all the form of child abuse and that most of them had experienced one form of abuse or the other. The study recommends that more mechanisms should be put in place to help children access information related to child abuse. The curriculum should be modified so as to contain information that will conscientise children about cases of child abuse.

Keywords: Abuse, Pupils, Cluster, Awareness, Child, Causes.



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1. Introduction

Our children today face challenges that prior generations never had to deal with in addition to traditional peer pressure that comes with being a child ([Melton, 2008](#)). As [Doyle \(2009\)](#) states, students today need to be educated and empowered about abuse not only from strangers but from their parents, relatives as well as their teachers. Almost on a weekly basis, newspapers in Zimbabwe carry stories of child abuse of one kind or the other. Some of these stories are so inhuman as to be believed, but this is the reality we have to face and deal with. As [Choga \(2013\)](#) observed, fathers are raping their own children, teachers abusing their pupils, women abusing boys, employers engaging young people below the age of eighteen and many such abuses. Some cases of child abuse have gone unreported or have been deliberately swept under the carpet by adults and in some cases swept under the carpet by

adults who claim to be child rights watchdogs, (Taylor and Steward, 2011). It is on account of this information that this study set out to investigate the level of awareness among pupils about cases of child abuse perpetrated against children.

2. Literature Review

Child abuse is any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation, an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm (Wolfe, 2011). This implies that there are four main types of child abuse namely, physical, sexual, psychological and neglect.

According to Hosin (2007), physical abuse involves physical aggression directed at a child by an adult. Most nations with child abuse laws consider the deliberate infliction of serious injury or death, to be illegal (Ross, 2006). On the other hand, Fontana (2004) says that bruises, scratches, burns, broken bones, lacerations, as well as repeated “mishaps,” and rough treatment that could cause physical injury, can be physical abuse. Multiple injuries or fractures at different stages of healing can raise suspicion of abuse (Wolfe, 2011). Physical abuse can come in many forms, although as Hoyano and Keenan (2007) posit, the distinction between child discipline and abuse is often poorly defined. However, the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations has stated that the prohibition of degrading treatment or punishment extends to corporal punishment (Ross, 2006).

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a form of child abuse in which an adult or older adolescent abuses a child for sexual stimulation (Gorcy and Leslie, 2007). Sexual abuse refers to the participation of a child in a sexual act aimed toward the physical gratification or the financial profit of the person committing the act (Hosin, 2007). Gorcy and Leslie (2007) go on to state that forms of child sexual abuse include asking or pressuring a child to engage in sexual activities (regardless of the outcome), indecent exposure of the genitals to a child, displaying pornography to a child, actual sexual contact with a child, physical contact with the child’s genitals, viewing of the child’s genitalia without physical contact, or using a child to produce child pornography.

Effects of child sexual abuse on the victim(s) according to Theoklitos *et al.* (2011) include guilt and self-blame, flashbacks, nightmares, insomnia, fear of things associated with the abuse (including objects, smells, places, doctors’ visits and many others), self-esteem issues, sexual dysfunction, chronic pain, addiction, self-injury, suicidal ideation, somatic complaints, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, other mental illnesses including borderline personality disorder and dissociative identity disorder, propensity to re-victimisation in adulthood, bulimia nervosa and physical injury to the child among other problems. According to Gorcy and Leslie (2007) in the United States of America, approximately 15% to 25% of women and 5% to 15% of men were sexually abused when they were children and most sexual abuse offenders are acquitted with their victims, approximately 30% are relatives of the child, most often brothers, fathers, mothers, uncles or cousins; around 60% are other acquaintances such as friends of the family, babysitters or neighbours, strangers are the offenders in approximately 10% of child abuse cases and in one-third of the cases, the perpetrator is also a minor. In 1999 news story, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) on the RAHI Foundation’s survey of sexual abuse in India, reported that 76% of the respondents admitted that they had been abused as children and 40% of those stated that the perpetrator was a family member (Noh, 1994).

Psychological or emotional abuse, according to Finkelman (2010) is the production of psychological and social defects in the growth of a child as a result of behaviour such as loud yelling, coarse and rude attitude, inattention, harsh criticism and denigration of the child’s personality. Other examples include name-calling, ridicule, degradation, destruction of personal belongings, (torture) or killing of a pet, excessive criticism, inappropriate or excessive demands, withholding communication and routing labeling or humiliation (Cohn, 2011). Hosin (2007) states that victims of emotional abuse may react by distancing themselves from the abuser, internalizing the abusive words or fighting back by insulting the abuser and emotional abuse can result in abnormal or disrupted attachment development, a tendency for victims to blame themselves (self-blame) for the abuse, learned helplessness and overly passive behaviour.

The other type of child abuse is neglect. Shumba and Abosi (2011) state that child neglect is the failure of a parent or other person with responsibility for the child to provide needed food, clothing, shelter, medical care or supervision to the degree that the child’s health, safety and well-being are threatened with harm. Neglect is also viewed by Krason (2007) as lack of attention from the people surrounding a child and the non-provision of the relevant and adequate necessities for the child’s survival, which would be a lacking in attention, love and nurture. Some of the observable signs in a neglected child include frequent absenteeism from schools, begs or steals food or money, lacks needed medical and dental care, is consistently dirty or lack of sufficient clothing for the weather. Molina (2006) posits that neglected children may experience delays in physical and psychosocial development possibly resulting in psychopathology and impaired neuropsychological functions including executive function, attention, processing speed, language memory and social skills.

Other types of child labour include child labour, child trafficking, female genital mutilation, child marriages, and violence against children’s accused of witchcraft (Molina, 2006). According to Becker-Weidman (2011), child labour refers to the employment of children in any work that deprives them of their childhood, interferes with their ability to attend regular school or is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful. Child

trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, labouring or receipt of children for the purpose of exploitation. As [Bussien \(2011\)](#) observes, children are trafficked for purposes such as of commercial sexual exploitation, bonded labour, child domestic labour, drug couriering, child soldiering, illegal adoptions and/or begging. Female genital mutilation (FGM) is defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as “all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons ([Gorcy and Leslie, 2007](#)). Female genital mutilation is most often carried out on young girls aged between infancy and 15 years. The consequences of FGM include physical, emotional and sexual problems and include serious risks during child birth.

Child marriage, according to [Krason \(2007\)](#) is a marriage whereby minors are given in matrimony often before puberty. Child marriages are common in many parts of the world especially in parts of Asia and Africa ([Noh, 1994](#)). These marriages, according to [Noh \(1994\)](#) are typically arranged and often forced as young children are generally not capable of giving valid consent to enter into marriage. Child marriages are often considered by default to be forced marriages. Marriage below the age of majority has a great potential to constitute a form of child abuse ([Noh, 1994](#)). In many countries as [Krason \(2007\)](#) observes, there are no adequate laws to criminalise these practices and even where there are laws, they are often not enforced.

2.1. Statement of the Problem

Child abuse is a prevalent occurrence in Zimbabwe that affects almost every strata of society. The press is always full of cases of child abuse of one type or the other on almost a daily basis. Perpetrators also vary but the pervasive denominator is that they are mainly adults’ relatives or non-relatives. There is therefore, need to conscientise would-be victims of this heinous act so that it can be minimised. This study seeks to specifically investigate the level of awareness of school children about child abuse.

2.2. Purpose of the Study

The study sought to establish the extent to which pupils are aware of different forms of child abuse that affect them in order to empower the pupils to report child abuse and even fight it.

3. Research Questions

The study sought to provide answers to the following research questions.

1. Are pupils aware of different forms of child abuse that affect their learning?
2. Do pupils know what to do when they or their siblings or friends are abused?
3. What role do school authorities play to empower pupils on knowledge about child abuse?
4. Are pupils aware of the impact of child abuse on their education?

3.1. Significance of the Study

The importance of the study stemmed from the fact that it sought to bring out the degree of awareness of child abuse that the pupils have and the role teachers can play in empowering pupils so that they can report these cases. This is significant in that the information gathered would assist educational planners and policy makers in policy formulation and programmes that enhance the fight against child abuse.

3.2. Limitations of the Study

The study is limited to pupils’ awareness levels about child abuse cases perpetrated against children using a small sample of pupils. The study is thus no more than a snap shot of pupils’ attributions regarding what constitutes child abuse. Clearly, the findings cannot be generalised but they alert one to experiences of pupils regarding child abuse using a small sample.

3.3. Delimitation of the Study

The researchers delimited the investigation to establishing the level of awareness of pupils about various forms of child abuse that affect them in one cluster in Nkayi District of Zimbabwe. Knowledge about child abuse from teachers, heads of schools and parents were outside the purview of this study.

4. Research Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative methodology and made use of a case study research design. The methodology and the design were selected because they afforded the pupils to live their experiences in their daily lives. The population consisted of all pupils at Gomadoda cluster in the Nkayi South Circuit in Nkayi District. Random sampling was used to select a sample of 30 pupils. Random sampling was chosen because as [Kumar \(2008\)](#) observes each independent, same size subset within a population is given an equal chance of becoming a subject. Therefore, as [Anderson \(2011\)](#) argues if properly conducted simple random sampling results in a sample highly representative of the population of interest. However, as [Blumberg \(2008\)](#) states, while the randomness of the selection process

ensures the unbiased choice of subjects, it could also by chance, lead to the assembly of a sample which does not represent the population well. This random variation, independent of all human bias and in many cases difficult to pinpoint is known as “sampling error.” The probability of incurring errors in sample increases with decreased sample size (Lawrence, 2005).

4.1. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were gathered by means of semi-structured interviews using an interview guide. All interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and became the primary data source for analysis used by the researchers (Babbie, 2012). The aim was to understand experiences from the participants’ point of view. A transparent disclosure of the role of the researchers and their relationship with the participants, “the volunteering” of participants and description of the abusive situations pupils experience was done to contextualise the research and to allow for the impact of the researcher’s roles and participant selection on findings. The use of a small sample is common in qualitative research where the aim is depth and not breadth.

5. Findings and Discussion

The study sought to investigate the awareness levels of primary school pupils about child abuse in Zimbabwean schools. This part is presented in two parts, namely, demographic data and actual findings.

5.1. Demographic Data

Table-1. Distribution of Research Participants by Sex N = 30

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	12	40
Female	18	60
Total	30	100

Table 1 above shows that 60% of the respondents were female and the other 40% were male.

Table-2. Composition of Respondents by Approximate Age N = 30

Age in Years	Frequency	Percentage
0 – 8 Years	5	17
10 – 12 Years	11	36
13 – 16 Years	14	47
Total	30	100

Table 2 above shows that 17% of the respondents fell within the 0 – 8 years age group, 36% within the 10 – 12 years age group and 47% fell within the 13 – 16 years age group.

5.2. Actual Research Findings

One of the many challenges facing society in Zimbabwe and the world over is the suffering that children experience under a hidden epidemic of child abuse and neglect. Children throughout the world experience one form of neglect or the other and in the majority of cases, these children might not be aware that they are being abused. As Noh (1994) argues the best method to reduce cases of child abuse is through the empowerment of children themselves by making them aware of what child abuse entails and how they can avoid abusive situations before they are abused.

This enquiry revealed that the majority of children under study stayed with grandparents followed by those staying with step parents, and then those staying with uncles, aunties and brothers and sisters. A few were staying with their biological parents. The high percentage of pupils staying with their biological parents may imply a high probability of these children experiencing abuse. As Molina (2006) posits, the majority of children who experience abuse do not stay with their biological parents. This therefore, means that children in this study are likely to experience abuse by those who stay with them.

The study also showed that the majority of pupils indicated that they were not aware of what child abuse entailed. After explaining to the participants about the types of child abuse, the majority of pupils indicated that they had experienced those acts of abuse, particularly corporal punishment both at home and in class, bullying, neglect through denial of food as punishment, verbal abuse and emotional abuse. This tally with findings by Bussien (2011) who discovered that the majority of children thought that their abuse was normal treatment that adults had every right and duty to give to them because they were not aware that they were being abused. However, as Krason (2007) posits, there is a very thin line between normal upbringing of children and child abuse particularly in most developing countries.

This inquiry also revealed that most respondents stated that their parents/guardians did not teach them about child abuse let alone talk about it in the homes. They also indicated that their school did not include information about child abuse in the curriculum. Teachers too were said to be not making pupils aware about child abuse. The few participants who indicated that they were aware about child abuse stated that they got the information from their parents who were police officers.

The study also established that after explaining to pupils what constituted abuse, they opened up and revealed that grandparents were abusing them, neighbours, teachers, brothers, family members, strangers as well as other pupils. The reason for this high prevalence of abuse is that the abusers took advantage of the pupils' ignorance on the subject. The pupils could not defend themselves because their guardians were either old or defenseless or had strong cultural beliefs that promoted "abuse" of children. This tallies with findings by Taylor and Steward (2011) who said that orphaned pupils were sometimes forced into traditional marriages organised by grandparents. If pupils had enough power on the subject, they could find against child abuse.

On how they reacted after experiencing the abuse, most of the pupils indicated that they did not report the abuse to anyone as they were afraid if it got the ears of their abusers they would commit more acts of abuse against them. They therefore feared to report when they were abused. A few however, indicated that they reported cases of abuse to their class teachers who, according to the pupils did not seem keen to pursue the matter further. Those who stated that they reported to their parents were very few and they indicated that their parents did not believe them particularly their male parents or guardians.

On how they felt after experiencing abuses, all the pupils indicated that they felt the effects of abuse on their learning. Some indicated that they felt as if they were different from other pupils. Those abused by men state that they did not want to mix with males or even coming close to them. In other words, going to a school with boys and male teachers made them feel uncomfortable. Some pupils said they felt sleepy in the classroom, particularly those who were awakened very early in the morning by step parents particularly step mothers to perform household chores before they left for school. Other pupils indicated that they lost memory about school work because most of the time they were thinking about the abuse they would experience when they got home.

6. Conclusion

Given the background of the above findings, the researchers make the following conclusions:

- Child abuse in schools is a hidden curriculum that affects many pupils.
- Most children are not aware that they are being abused and this makes it easy for them to become willing victims.
- Very few people can be trusted with the protection of children as all categories of parents or guardians have the potential to abuse their children just like other relatives and strangers.
- Most children were not aware of what constituted child abuse.
- The most common forms of child abuse experienced by pupils included corporal punishment, bullying, verbal and emotional abuse, sexual abuse, as well as neglect.
- Parents, teachers and even heads of schools did not talk about child abuse to pupils thus, the magnitude of unawareness about the problem.
- Pupils were also not able to defend themselves because there also not able to defend themselves because there were no systems put in place to protect them from further abuse after reporting.
- Pupils did not report cases of abuse because they feared retribution from their abusers after they got information that they reported them.
- Pupils experienced negative feelings as a result of abuses perpetrated against them and this affected their school life profoundly.

7. Recommendations

In light of the findings of this study, the researchers would like to make some recommendations.

- Schools should have regular sessions where senior teachers including the head, speak about various forms of child abuse to pupils so as to conscientise all pupils in the school about this phenomenon.
- Community leaders should be encouraged by the government to effect stiffer penalties for those adults who abuse children within their localities especially under the guise of cultural beliefs for example on child marriages, beating up of children, neglect of children through failure to provide basic necessities like food, clothing or school fees and / or child labour in order to protect children.
- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should reconfigure the primary school curriculum so as to include information on child abuse on pupils' learning.
- Schools should be encouraged to establish peer educator clubs for all age groups to provide awareness about child abuse to all pupils.
- The Government of Zimbabwe, through the Department of Social Welfare should make child line facilities accessible to all pupils particularly these in rural areas so as to enable pupils to report cases of abuse anonymously without fear of victimisation.
- Government should design schemes that will help to rehabilitate pupils who have been negatively affected by child abuse in all its forms.

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Authors' Bio-data

1. **Thembinkosi Tshabalala (Dr):** He is a Senior Lecturer and National Programme Leader for the Master of Education in Educational Management in the Faculty of Arts and Education at the Zimbabwe Open University. He is a PhD holder in Educational Management. He has published more than 30 papers in peer reviewed journals. He can be contacted at the Zimbabwe Open University P.O.Box MP1119 Mount Pleasant Harare Zimbabwe OR by E-mail (tshabalalathembinkosi@yahoo.com).
2. **Mufunani Tungu Khosa (Dr):** He is a Senior Lecturer and National Programme Leader for the Bachelor of Education in Educational Foundations in the Faculty of Arts and Education at the Zimbabwe Open University. He is a PhD holder in Monitoring and Evaluation in Educational Management. He has published more than 5 papers in peer reviewed journals. He can be contacted at the Zimbabwe Open University P.O.Box MP1119 Mount Pleasant Harare Zimbabwe OR by E-mail by E-mail (tungukhosa@gmail.com).