

Emerging issues on child abuse: Voices of student teachers

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Abstract: This study sought to find out issues emerging from student teachers pertaining to how they conceptualise child abuse. The study was premised on the qualitative design methodology. It was conducted when participants were now in the University after completing their teaching practice in the schools. The main data collecting tool was through the essays they wrote in connection with what they had observed in schools pertaining to their concept of child abuse. Their focus was on child abuse by qualified teachers. Since they were now away from their teachers, it was assumed that they would write all their observations without fear hence increasing reliability and validity of data collected. Data were analysed using content analysis. Student teachers conceptualize child abuse as the ill-treatment of pupils by teachers which was in the form of sexuality, physical nature, emotional form and making pupils do domestic activities for teachers that are not the core business of the school curriculum during school time. It was concluded and recommended that pupils must be made aware of the issues regarding child abuse and their rights within this domain.

Keywords: Child Abuse, Student Teacher, Sexual Abuse, Emotional Abuse, Physical Abuse

1. Introduction

The issue of child abuse by teachers in schools is now both a local and international social problem that needs to be addressed locally and internationally [1]. Parents and community leaders regard teachers in schools as second parents. Teachers are expected to act in *loco-parentis* within schools and are expected to be highly responsible people. Parents theoretically regard them with high esteem as they are entrusted to care for the children under their jurisdiction. However, observation indicates that some of the teachers are betraying the communities which empower them to spend more than three quarters of the time in a year with children under their custody. They betray societies by abusing school pupils who may not even be aware that they are being abused. They are like shepherds who are preying on their lambs they are looking after. In this regard, some teachers therefore are abusing their *loco-parentis* role as they abuse the school children who appear innocent and fragile.

2. Background and Context

Previous studies show that child abuse is rampant and varies from culture to culture and from society to society

[2-4]. Although child abuse is reported to be on the increase globally, there is no agreed definition of child abuse [1, 5-6]. As such, the lack of uniformity in the definition of child abuse has made it difficult to interpret and to compare the different findings from various studies [7-8]. Evidence available shows that child abuse has no boundary because children of all ages, socio-economic statuses, and ethnic and racial groups are victims of child abuse [9-11]. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as a person who is under the age of 18 [12]. In general, child abuse occurs when a parent, guardian or caregiver (such as a teacher) mistreats a child sexually, physically or emotionally resulting in injury, emotional or psychological harm, or serious risk of harm to the child [13].

Studies show that there are three forms of child abuse that are known internationally and these are sexual, physical and emotional abuse [9, 11, 14-15]. In his study of child abuse in Zimbabwean schools, [6] found another form of child abuse known as the 'hidden curriculum' abuse whereby pupils are involved in doing domestic chores at teachers' houses during school hours. These domestic chores include cooking for teachers, washing pots and plates for teachers, sweeping the teacher's house,

making the teacher's bed, buying groceries for teachers, fetching water and firewood for teachers, selling pop-corn, freezits or fruits for teachers. All these activities that children are involved in are not the core business of the school curriculum and they benefit teachers and not pupils. This form of child abuse is normally prevalent in rural primary schools in Africa. In most cases, the abuser is not aware that he or she is abusing the victim (the pupil) and the victims (the pupils) do not know that they are being abused [6]. Child sexual abuse occurs when a child is used for sexual purposes by an adult and this involves exposing the child to any sexual activity such as sexual intercourse, fondling (making a child to touch or be touched sexually; or touching private parts, buttocks), harassment, kissing, hugging, prostitution and sexual exploitation through showing pornographic materials to children [4,10-11,15]. Sexual abuse is inherently abusive and is often accompanied by separate and more direct forms of psychological abuse. Hence, a child exposed to sexual abuse also suffers emotionally and psychologically [16-19]. Physical abuse is the deliberate application of force on the child's body which may result in injury or non-accidental injuries [13,20-21,14]. It also includes behaviour such as kicking, pushing, pinching, beating, hitting, shaking, burning, choking or any other harmful or dangerous use of force or restraint used on the child [22-23, 11, 14]. Emotional abuse or psychological abuse occurs when a parent or caregiver does not provide essential requisites to a child's emotional, psychological and physical development [24-25, 21]. Physical neglect occurs when a child's needs such as food, clothing, shelter, medical care and protection are not adequately met and emotional abuse occurs when a child's need to be loved, wanted, safe and worthy are not met by adults or caregivers [26], emotional neglect involves rejection, degrading, humiliation, terrorizing or scolding the child in public or in front of others [17, 21-22]. It also involves attack on the child's sense of self or self-concept [27, 18-19]. In other words, it can make the child lose self-confidence in oneself. It is clear from the forms of child abuse that child abuse in the new millennium can now be considered as involving four forms of child abuse: sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse and the 'hidden curriculum' abuse.

It is against this background that I decided to carry out this study on the views of student teachers on child abuse.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) students (28 of them) at Midlands State University in Zimbabwe were purposively selected to participate. They comprised a combined class of both the Conventional and Block Release cohort. The students had completed their second semester out of a 12 months programme. The sample comprised 15 male and 13 female students who did their

teaching practice for over a full first school term in their home schools. The main data from participants was collected before students wrote their final examinations in June. All participants rested for a week after completing their work related learning (teaching practice) before resuming their lectures at the university. All the participants were attached to a qualified and experienced teacher during their teaching practice so that they could learn from their expertise since this was university policy. All the participants taught in co-educational schools.

Participants used in this study were an ideal group because they had already acquired a minimum of 2 years of teaching experience before their teaching practice and because they supplied information on child abuse based on their observations in the schools they taught. In other words, participants were putting their educational theory into practice. All participants were expected to be very observant on all the school activities and how teachers interacted with their pupils. Participants' observation was first hand information and is likely to be valid and reliable. Since some of the teachers were likely to be perpetrators of child abuse on their pupils, therefore, it was not ideally to use teachers as participants in such a study.

3.2. Instruments

This study adopted the qualitative method by using the essay form. The advantage of using the essay form is that participants were free to express their own feelings and observations about child abuse in schools. Participants were asked to write an essay: (a) explaining what they understand by child abuse from the school context; (b) indicating forms of child abuse perpetrated by teachers on pupils in schools; (c) suggesting causes of child abuse by teachers in schools; and (d) suggesting the action that could be taken against child abuse perpetrators in schools. The study was conducted when students were back at the university from teaching practice. In this study, it is assumed that since the perpetrator was no longer present, student teachers were able to verbalize the forms of child abuse perpetrated by their mentors and other teachers during their teaching practice. Data in this study were analysed using content analysis.

3.3. Procedure

The study was conducted when students were back at the university from teaching practice. It is assumed that since the perpetrator is no longer present, student teachers are able to verbalize the forms of child abuse perpetrated by their mentors and other teachers during their teaching practice. Student teachers were asked to write an essay explaining what they understand by child abuse from the school context; to indicate forms of child abuse that they observed being perpetrated by teachers on pupils in schools; to suggest causes of child abuse by teachers in schools; and to suggest the action that should be taken against child abuse perpetrators in schools. A focus group discussion

was carried out to triangulate and validate findings.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data in this study were analysed using thematic approach using different forms of child abuse. The following themes were adopted to analyse data: child abuse, sexual abuse; physical abuse; emotional or verbal abuse; and domestic chores.

3.5. Ethical Issues

Participation in the study was voluntary. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants so that they could take part with a full understanding of the study. It was made clear to participants that the information collected was confidential and would only be used for purposes of the study.

4. Results

4.1. Emerging Issues on Child Abuse in Zimbabwean Schools

Participant's conceptualization of child abuse into the following themes and sub-themes:

Table 1. Conceptualization of child abuse by student teachers.

Main Theme	Sub-theme
Sexual abuse	Fondling; holding hands; hugging
Physical abuse	Corporal punishment; canning, beating using fists.
Emotional abuse	Verbal- scolding, vulgar, insults, mockery
Domestic chores	Child labour

The themes derived from contributions by participants were divided into 4 categories. These were sexual abuse; physical abuse; emotional abuse and domestic chores.

4.1.1. Sexual Abuse

Participants view sexual abuse as 'sexual harassment, sexual attacks, fondling, sexual intercourse under duress'; 'ill-treatment of a child within the school context e.g. canning, sexual harassment'; 'improper association with pupils'; 'having love affairs with pupils'; 'holding hands, hugging, using sexual explicit language to a child'; 'having sexual intercourse with pupils even outside the school premises'; 'fondling female students (breasts, buttocks, private parts etc.); 'making sexual advances'; participants also reported that 'some teachers exchange pornographic videos with pupils leading to pupils becoming promiscuous'; 'put on a miniskirt whilst teaching A' Level boy pupils who started admiring the teacher and wishing they were in bed with the teacher – this act of exposing herself is a form of child abuse'; and 'some pupils are silenced by being given gifts like money'. Both male and female pupils are sexually abused by teachers; male teachers are mainly involved in sexual abuse in schools; girls are impregnated and cannot make decisions on their own. Such adults should be charged with statutory rape and should be discharged from the teaching service for

committing such offences, argued participants.

4.1.2. Physical Abuse

Participants view physical abuse as: 'the administration of unlawful corporal punishment on pupils by teachers'; 'any physical action that affects the child physically or psychologically'; administering corporal punishment on learners without following necessary statutory procedures; teachers sometimes use bare hands to assault learners as a form of punishment; this is an act of misconduct and child abuse'; 'physical assault using a stick to beat up the pupil'; 'hard canning of pupils by teachers'; indiscriminate beating of school children for making noise in class'; and, 'physical abuse such as canning'. It is clear from this definition that participants view physical abuse as involving physical or psychological abuse of the child.

4.1.3. Emotional Abuse

Participants view emotional abuse within the school context as: 'the ill-treatment of children by people entrusted for their upkeep e.g. teachers, heads of schools etc'; 'depriving pupils of what they should get'; 'any action meted on a child by an adult or person in authority on a school child, for example, hurting the child by scolding him or her, any action taken by an adult that may emotionally, psychologically harm the child'; 'ill-treatment of children by people entrusted for their upkeep e.g. teachers, heads etc.'; 'an act that causes sorrow, pain, deprivation etc' 'using abusive language on pupils because of family or professional frustration'; 'using all forms of foul language on pupils that hurts their self-concept'; 'verbal abuse by both male and female teachers i.e. verbal assault or use of vulgar language e. g at *assembly*. This may cause psychological or emotional damage on the child'; humiliating misbehaving pupils in front of the whole class i.e. degrading, stress, embarrassment'. 'calling pupils names in front of other pupils'; 'labelling pupils as 'useless, stupid, dull' –This causes the pupil to hate school'; and 'scolding pupils in front of the class caused low morale and low self-concept on pupils'.

4.1.4. Domestic Chores

Participants view abuse of pupils involving doing domestic chores / child labour as: 'making pupils do menial work that do not benefit the child or the school e.g. cleaning teachers' houses during school hours'; 'asking for money from pupils meant for pupils' transport or lunch'; 'an act of using a school pupil wrongly or badly for one's benefit'; 'making children clean the teachers' house or fetch water for teachers without pay during school hours'– the teacher takes advantage of the child who does not know his / her rights (violation of children's rights); 'doing domestic chores or child labour at teachers' houses'; 'selling certain items for teachers to supplement their meagre remuneration'; 'working in the teacher's garden during school hours'; 'sending pupils to buy beer for them during school hours'; 'sending pupils to grocery shops to buy foodstuffs for them during school hours. This deprives

pupils of their learning time and risk being involved in accidents (child safety in schools); 'sending pupils to fetch water and firewood – prevalent in rural areas'; 'sending pupils to sell sweets, freezits, samoosas, bread, biscuits, pop-corn for teachers during break – was done by female teachers'; 'These activities are not part of the core-business of the school'; 'These domestic chores are not part of the school curriculum and hence they are a form of child abuse'. A lazy teacher who asks pupils to mark other pupils' work – this is child abuse and an act of misconduct because this is not part of pupil's duties in school and they are not paid for doing the job. 'Marking registers for teachers'; 'sending pupils on errands during lessons are examples of child abuse.

4.2. Effects of Child Abuse on Pupils

Participants indicated that child abuse: 'causes sorrow, pain, low self-esteem or negative self-esteem'; 'teachers steal pupils' time for resting'; 'makes a child develop a low self-concept'; 'Verbal abuse 'kills' the child's morale and drive to try during lessons'; 'Vulgar language causes pupils to hate school, feel inferior, transfer to other schools etc'; 'Use of corporal punishment makes pupils to fear the teacher; hate school and opt to transfer to other schools'.

4.3. Causes of Child Abuse

Participants reported the following as some of the causes of child abuse in schools:

(a) Young male teachers admire school girls causing them to fall in love with learners; (b) female teachers fall in love with boys because of looseness or inward admiration of the boy; (c) Some girls wear indecent clothes that expose their bodies; (d) Lack of monitoring by school administrators; (e) Teachers are fearful and powerful within the school because of their *loco-parentis* role and authority within the school; (f) Ignorance about the legal rights / legal protection of children by teachers, pupils and parents; (g) Pupil from *poor background* who lure teachers into love relationships in order to get money or married;

(h) Teachers have power and authority over pupils in schools; (i) Poverty e.g. poor remuneration and conditions of service for teachers; (j) Poor leadership in some schools where the head engages in sexual abuse of pupils and this leads to teachers doing the same practice; Ignorance on the part of teachers and pupils; Frustration and economic hardships faced by teachers; Low morale of teachers; Stress, lack of job interest and irritation; Too much closeness between pupils and teachers; Teachers use corporal punishment after failing to instil discipline in learners; corporal punishment is an aggressive act used to express his or her aggression or frustration of meagre pay or inferiority; Poor supervision of pupils by the school administration or because the head is also involved in the practice and so other teachers copy the behaviour (imitation); Poor remuneration of teachers that led some teachers to solicit for money from pupils' money for

transport and lunch.

4.4. Action to be taken against Pupil Abusers

In the focus group discussion, the following views were considered to be the action worth taking against pupil abusers: 'Discharge from the teaching service (Public Service) and hand them over to the police and charge them with statutory rape if the girl is under 16 and the boy is under 14 years'; 'Discharge / dismissal from the teaching service'; 'Be fined heavily; Immediate suspension from the teaching service'; 'Withhold promotion; Reprimand / warn the teacher involved'; 'Abusers must be prosecuted and sent to jail'; 'Pupils must report child abuse to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Child Alert, Child Helpline, Child and Law Project etc. Children should be provided with toll free numbers to access the NGOs etc.'; 'Blacklisting pupil abusers from the teaching service'; 'Provide teachers with alternatives to corporal punishment in schools'; 'School heads and counsellors must counsel abusive teachers'; 'Heads must bar teachers who sell items to pupils in schools'; 'Include human rights in the syllabus for teacher training'; 'Conduct seminars for teachers on child abuse within the school'; 'Government should improve conditions of service for teachers'; 'School heads need to implement Public Service (Disciplinary) Regulations on perpetrators'; 'Have 'whistle blowers' who report such abuses in schools'; 'Guidance and counselling of children necessary for children in schools'; 'Parents must give their children adequate resources for their educational needs'; 'Teachers who administer corporal punishment without the head's approval should be charged with assault'; 'Verbal abuse should lead to suspension or even prosecution'; 'Teachers must withdraw privileges instead of using corporal punishment on pupils'; 'Teachers should be cautioned'; 'Conduct awareness seminars on dangers of child abuse (e.g. HIV/AIDS) for teachers, parents and pupils'; 'Have open discussions on the issue of child abuse with teachers and pupils'; 'Inform pupils to report any form of child abuse by teachers (empowerment)'; and 'Have a suggestion box for reporting child abuse in the school.

5. Discussion

From the participants' responses that child abuse by teachers is viewed as the maltreatment of children that involve 'irresponsible behaviour by an adult in charge of learners, what appears to emerge from these various conceptualizations is that teachers abuse their learners sexually, physically, emotionally and in doing domestic chores at their houses during schools hours. Similar findings have been reported in other studies conducted in Zimbabwe [1,28]. For example, [6] found that teachers involved pupils in doing such domestic chores as selling pop-corn, freezits and fruits or sending pupils to wash pots, plates, cook for them (teachers) at their houses during school hours. This form of child abuse is known as the 'hidden curriculum' abuse whereby the perpetrator is not

aware that he or she is abusing someone and whereby the victim is not also aware that he or she is being abused. Such teachers take advantage of their pupils by abusing their *loco-parentis* role within the school [28]. It is interesting to note that there are 'teachers soliciting for money from pupils'; and 'teachers who come to school or class drunk'. Soliciting for money from pupils perhaps reflects the economic problems facing teachers in Zimbabwe. This also shows that the meagre salaries of teachers do not sustain their needs. This paints a very gloomy picture and one wonders the kind of morals that these teachers are inculcating in their pupils. Some of the economic problems that teachers face, in fact degrade their status and need to be addressed, so that teachers can lead more decent lives. From the findings some teachers expose their pupils to various forms of sexual abuse. Such teachers are putting the teaching profession into disrepute and should be discharged from the teaching service for committing such offences.

Participants' argued that physical abuse is viewed also as involving emotional or psychological abuse of the child. This concurs with findings of other studies which argue that both physical abuse and sexual abuse involve emotional abuse of the victims involved [29, 21-22, 26, 6]. This implies that sexual abuse and physical abuse also involve emotional or psychological abuse [17].

Participants view emotional or verbal abuse within the school context as 'the ill-treatment of children by people entrusted for their upkeep e.g. teachers, heads of schools etc'; 'depriving pupils of what they should get'; 'any action meted on a child by an adult or person in authority on a school child, for example, hurting the child physically, psychologically or emotionally'; 'any action taken by an adult that may physically, emotionally, psychologically or sexually hurt or harm the child'; 'ill-treatment of children by people entrusted for their upkeep e.g. teachers, heads etc.'; 'an act that causes sorrow, pain, deprivation etc'; 'an action or verbal act of misconduct by teachers against pupils'; 'using abusive language on pupils because of family or professional frustration'; 'using all forms of foul language on pupils that hurt their self-concept'; 'verbal abuse by both male and female teachers i.e. verbal assault or use of vulgar language at assembly – this may cause psychological or emotional damage on the child'; 'scolding, verbal, assault, psychological. or misbehaving pupils in front of the whole class i.e. degrading, stress, embarrassment'; 'calling pupils names in front of other pupils'; 'emotional abuse of pupils'; 'use of vulgar language by teachers e.g. male and female teachers'; 'labelling pupils as 'useless, stupid, dull'– cause the pupil to hate school'; and 'scolding pupils in front of the class causes low morale and low self-concept on pupils'. There is no doubt from the participants' responses that teachers subject their pupils to various forms of emotional or verbal abuse in schools. Similar findings have been reported in other studies on emotional abuse by teachers in the classroom [16, 24, 17-19]. Research shows that emotional

or verbal abuse is now considered to be the most devastating form of child abuse than sexual abuse and physical abuse [26, 6, 18]. This is because this form of child abuse is internal and does not leave any visible scars on the victim. As such, it is necessary for teachers to be aware of the devastating effects of this form of child abuse on the total development of children.

6. Conclusions

Pupils need to be made aware about what is and is not child abuse by teachers in schools. Information on where pupils could report the abuse should be made available to them. Children should be provided with toll free numbers to access non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Child Alert, Child Helpline, Child and Law Project that deal with child abuse issues. On corporal punishment, I suggest that the government should 'provide teachers with alternatives to corporal punishment in schools'. It appears that most teachers have disciplinary problems with pupils in schools because of lack of alternatives. I suggest that school heads should 'ban teachers who sell items to pupils in schools'.

Teacher education curriculum should 'include human rights in the syllabus for teacher training'. In other words, schools should 'make pupils aware of their rights in schools' and should also 'conduct seminars on human rights of pupils e.g. invite a resource person (lawyer or police) to give a talk on human rights issues to both teachers and pupils'. Such resource persons should 'have open discussions on the issue of child abuse with both teachers and pupils'. This will empower pupils with the knowledge on what is child abuse within the school and be able to stand up against any forms of child abuse that might be perpetrated on them by some teachers in their schools. Schools could 'have a suggestion box for reporting child abuse in the school'. Such a suggestion box could scare away would-be-perpetrators within the school. Over and above, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education should 'conduct awareness seminars for teachers on what is child abuse within the school'. This will make teachers aware about what is and is not child abuse within the school. In order to address the issue of teachers who solicit for money from pupils, the 'government should improve conditions of service for teachers'. Although teachers do a lot of good work within the school, their conditions of service leave a lot to be desired because of escalating prices of basic commodities (e.g. food, fuel, transport, etc.) in Zimbabwe. Their salaries are far below the expected (Gross Domestic Product) and hence the possible reason why teachers appear to be very desperate to survive.

There are some school heads who do not know what to do with teachers who abuse pupils in their schools. 'School heads need to implement Public Service (Disciplinary) Regulations on perpetrators' of child abuse in their schools without fear or favour. It may also be useful to "have

‘whistle blowers’ who report such abuses in schools”. Some schools do not have school counsellors that could help the abused children. As such, the government should provide such personnel to cater for children’s needs in schools. In order to address the problem of economic poverty of pupils in schools, ‘parents must give their children adequate resources for their educational needs’. In this regard, parents need to give their children adequate pocket money so that female pupils will not be lured into having love affairs with some teachers as a means to address their economic needs.

Inasmuch as the study is valid in its methodological stance, and findings being reliable, there is great need for further studies to look at the way forward; how shall we curb child abuse?

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