Psychosocial Effects of Child Sexual Abuse on the Academic Performance of Grade Seven Learners in Gweru Urban, Zimbabwe

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Abstract
This research examined the psychosocial effects of child sexual abuse on academic performance among grade seven learners in Gweru urban, Zimbabwe with the aim of suggesting sound preventive and protective measures to mitigate the problems of child sexual abuse. There has been documented rise in the cases of child sexual abuse at family, community, district and provincial levels in Zimbabwe. It is estimated that approximately one in three girls and two in seven boys are victims of sexual abuse in Zimbabwe. This research is informed by Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory. In this study, a qualitative phenomenological case study design was used with in-depth interviews and focus group discussions as data collection instruments to fifteen learners, six Grade seven teachers and one police officer who were purposively sampled from one primary school in Gweru. Findings from this study revealed that child sexual abuse affected the moral, physical, cognitive/intellectual, emotional, social and behavioural development which consequently impacts on academic performance. Cultural and religious practices, poverty and HIV/AIDS were also noted to exacerbate the problems of child sexual abuse among learners. This research recommended that there is need for the government to introduce strict laws on the perpetrators of child sexual abuse. Legal expertise should also be sought and hence the need to report all sexual abuse cases to the police. There is also need to educate communities and conscientise them on the dangers of child sexual abuse on the academic performance of learners.

Keywords: child, sexual abuse, psychosocial, academic performance

INTRODUCTION
In Zimbabwe and the world over, there has been a documented rise in the cases of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) and almost every newspaper carries an article on this subject on a daily basis. CSA is a global phenomenon that occurs across cultures, regions and socio-economic groups with profound long-term physical and mental consequences. Gadzikwa, (2013) is of the view that CSA is insidious, hideous and a persistent serious problem in Zimbabwe. The worrisome part is that some of the perpetrators deliberately infect these children with HIV and AIDS. Research has established that CSA has a devastating, lifelong effect on the victims. Sexual abuse generates extreme anguish and disruption in the lives of the children (Laror, 2004). It is believed that most sexual abuse cases are not reported, detected or prosecuted due to cultural and religious factors (Chinyoka, 2013). Most children do not tell anyone that they are being sexually abused.

Children’s advocacy groups estimated that approximately one in three girls and two in seven boys of the world’s children are victims of sexual abuse (UNICEF, 2014). A great deal of research done abroad shows that the effects of child abuse depends on a variety of factors that influence negative outcomes, the age of the child when the abuse occur, who committed the abuse, whether or not violence was involved, how long the abuse went on and whether or not the child told anyone (Browne, 2008). Researchers have found out that children who are sexually abused whether or not they seek out mental health services, may suffer from a wide range of physiological factors which includes anxiety, depression, dissociation, hostility and anger, impaired relationships, low self-esteem, sexual dysfunctions, sleep disturbances and become suicidal (Liasak, 2014).

The Sunday Mail of June 5, 2014, recorded that incidence of CSA increased by thirty-four percent (34%) in twelve months between June 2013 and May 2014. Police records for Harare alone also show that between 2012 and 2014, twelve thousand five hundred and eighty (12580) cases of rape, excluding sodomy and indecent assault, were perpetrated on children, the result being life-long traumatisation of the victims (UNICEF, 2014). Data obtained from the National Aids Council
(NAC), Gender and Workplace department, shows that an average of 392 female juveniles were sexually abused monthly last year, translating to an average of 13 girls having been raped daily, most shocking is the report that the youngest victim in Zimbabwe was a two-week old baby (UNICEF, 2014). The Zimbabwe Republic Police reported that more than 100 girls are sexually abused every day in Zimbabwe (UNICEF, 2014). In Southern African countries like South Africa, Namibia, Botswana and Swaziland, CSA is also reported to be on the rise. A report by SAFAIDS executive, Lois Lunga quoted in the UNICEF (2013) shows that Southern Africa has the highest sexual abuse rates globally, and this increases the risk and vulnerability of girls and women to HIV infection. In South Africa, it is believed that a rape occurs every 26 seconds, a woman or a girl is raped every 60 seconds in Namibia, with the youngest rape victim being six months old, while the oldest was eighty-five years old (Chiwanga, 2012). Child line Botswana statistics show that at least thirty-four women and girls are assaulted every month and of these, sixty percent are children under the age of sixteen. Reports from Zimbabwean courts also show that most cases that have come to the courts directly point to activities by traditional healers. These revolve around the myth that having sex with a virgin cures HIV and AIDS (UNICEF, 2013).

Recent research also reveals that boys are almost as vulnerable to CSA as girls but the perpetrators are mostly people from outside their homes (Gadzikwa, 2013). A research by Chinyoka, Hlupo, Kufakunesu, Ganga, and Denhere (2014) established that boys are abused as often as girls are, mostly by women abusers. It was also established that both male and female perpetrators forced boys to have sex with them. Against this background the sample of this study will comprise both boys and girls so that the researcher determines the extent to which their academic performance is affected by CSA.

An analysis of the 2013 statistics reveals that most offenders of CSA in Zimbabwe and other African countries are trusted not only by the children they harm, they are often trusted and respected members of their communities such as neighbors, uncles, cousins, fathers, stepfathers and friends (Chinyoka, 2013). The people who should be protecting the children from harm are the same people who betray their trust by violating and robbing them of their innocence. Police revealed that in the low density of Hatfield, a suburb in Harare, Zimbabwe, there were six reported cases of parents who raped their own children while in the crime infested informal settlement of Epworth, 90 cases were reported this year (Family support Trust, 2011). More cases have been suppressed as some parents are paid to conceal such abuses and in some cases the offenders would be the guardian so people are afraid of losing breadwinners (Gadzikwa and the Victim Friendly Unit, 2013). As a result of such abuse, many victims live through feelings of confusion, guilt, anger, mistrust, sadness, and emotional deprivation (Lawrence & Janse van Rensburg, 2006). Given the above, sexually abused children now feel insecure, a factor which may traumatize them for the rest of their lives as they live in fear of being raped, not being sure of being alive tomorrow hence the need to explore the psychosocial effects of CSA among Grade Seven children in Gweru urban.

CSA is widely regarded as having a negative impact on social and interpersonal functioning of primary school learners (Hlupo and Tsikira, 2013). Children and adolescents who have been sexually abused suffer psychological and behavioural problems ranging from mild to severe disorders in both the short and long term (Chinyoka and Ganga, 2011). These problems typically include depression, anxiety, guilt, post traumatic disorder, fear, and withdrawal and acting out. Mullen et al (2013) conducted a study on New Zealand women and found strong positive correlation between a history of CSA and mental health problems in adult life. In Zimbabwe, sexual abuse cases are sometimes settled out of court when the perpetrator pays compensation to avoid bringing public attention and shame to the girl and family.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The subject matter of personality can be viewed from different theoretical perspectives, all of which contribute significantly to the overall understanding of the effects of CSA on a child’s academic performance, and his/her personality as a whole. Ecological/systems theory and the Rational Emotive Behavioural Therapy (REBT) are the major theories that guide this study.

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological System theory looks at a child’s environment in terms of its quality and context, as well as how this environment affects all the other areas of the child’s life, (Donald, Lazurus and Lolwana, 2010:34). It puts forward that child development occurs within an interactive system of nested influences between the child and the environment. His ecological environment consists of the following five nested structures: microsystems, mesosystem, exosystem, macro system and chronosystem (Rathus 2006:26, Berk 2007:23, Donald et al (2010:36). This theory looks at a child’s development within the context of the system of relationships that form his/her environment. Donald et al (2010:37) posit that microsystems are systems in
which children are closely involved in proximal interactions with other familiar people (such as the family). They involve roles, relationships and patterns of daily activities that shape many aspects of cognitive, social, emotional, moral and spiritual development. In this study, the children live within their family units while orphans live in foster homes. Relationships within these homes as well as their daily patterns of life will in turn affect their academic performance as well as adjustment in their school environment. Structures in the microsystems include the family, school, and neighbourhood or childcare environments (Boyd and Bee, 2006).

Exosystem refer to one or more settings that do not involve the child as an active participant, but can affect the child’s immediate setting, (Cole et al 2009, and Donald et al 2010). These settings have an effect on the child’s life even though s/he does not participate. They include school boards, parent’s workplaces and community agencies. If both parents are working abroad the children are more likely to be exposed to CSA. Some guardians are likely to misuse their power of authority leading them to abuse the children.

Donald et al (2010) describe the macro system as the one that involves dominant social and economic structures as well as values, beliefs and practices that influence all other social system. For example, a cultural value will then influence the proximal interactions in the child’s microsystems and probably, her/his whole mesosystem too. The chronosystem involves development over time that affects the interactions between these systems as well as their influences on the academic and intellectual development of learners. Changes such as parental divorce, historical events, or social conditions occur within the environment of a developing person (Bronfenbrenner, 2008). Parental divorce can also fuel cases of abuse. The Daily Mail 4 October 2015 reported a case were three sister were abused by their step father in Botswana. Rathus (2006:23) describes the chronosystem as the changes in the environment that occurs over time and has an effect on the child. In this case, the children have experienced change in their lives through sexual abuse in their backgrounds, deaths of parents and family.

An ecological systems model provides an appropriate framework to guide research and selection of appropriate interventions for families and children experiencing psychosocial problems. Understanding the interactions of these systems is the key in understanding how a child develops and what factors may lead to failure. The ecological model incorporates all areas of influence on the development of the child to assess the cause and also the solution to some increasing behavioural, academic and emotional problems seen today. Donald et al(2010:37) purport that things that happen in one part of the system can affect other parts and ultimately the ecological system as a whole, as explained in the work of Bronfenbrenner.

**Statement of the Problem**

The study seeks to examine the psychosocial effects of Child Sexual Abuse on the academic performance of Grade Seven learners in Gweru urban, Zimbabwe. The following research questions guided the study:

- What are the psychosocial effects of Child Sexual Abuse on the academic performance of Grade Seven learners in Gweru urban, Zimbabwe?
- What recommendations can be suggested to promote sexually abused on the academic performance of grade seven learners in Gweru urban, Zimbabwe?

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative phenomenological case study design was adopted in this study, which asks the question why and seeks to describe phenomena in words. A research design, according to Jackson (2005), is a plan or blueprint of how a research is to be conducted. Chinyoka (2013) states that the phenomenological tradition requires the researcher to immerse her or himself into the world inhabited by those they wish to study.

Purposive sampling was used to come up with the required number of participants. Patton (2015:264) points out that purposive sampling entails “Selecting information-rich cases to study, cases that are by their nature and substance, will illuminate the inquiry question being investigated.” A sample of twenty two (22) was purposively drawn from six teachers, one police officer and fifteen grade seven learners using purposive sampling methods.

Focus group discussions and interviews were the major instruments used to solicit data from the participants. Holloway and Wheeeler (2012) state that in focus group discussion researchers interview participants with common characteristics or experience for the purpose of eliciting ideas, thoughts and perceptions about specific topics or certain issues linked to an area of interest. In this study, the researchers interviewed only grade seven learners in three focus group discussions, one focus group from each school comprised of five learners who have been sexually abused with the aim to elicit their opinions on the
effects of CSA. This helped the researchers to obtain insights on the participants’ perceptions, needs, problems, beliefs and reasons for certain practices. The respondents were allowed to freely discuss the issue in a group of five people. Ethical issues were adhered to.

**Interviews**

In this study, the researchers used the semi-structured interview method in the collection of information from six teachers and one police officer. According to Tuckman (2012) in Chinyoka (2013) an interview is a way of getting data about people from people by asking them in order to get what is within their heads. More so, interviewing is a method of soliciting information and at the same time getting knowledge from individuals. Chinyoka (2013) propounds that interviews are an interchange of views between or among people on a topic. Furthermore, interviews helped to ease the explanation of highly complex or an abstract topic on CSA. In this study, the interview allowed the monitoring or evaluation of interpersonal skills, non-verbal and paralinguistic behaviour, emotional tone, behaviour under stress and consistency of interviewee’s answers.

**Limitations of the Study**

The greatest limitation to this study was children’s reluctance to talk about the subject of sexual abuse and admit that they had been abused. They also find it difficult to give an account of the abuse in detail. Teachers were also reluctant to talk about the subject or to disclose any cases that they come across since they considered the issue to be a sensitive and confidential. The researchers made every attempt to assure them of the confidentiality of all gathered information.

**Ethical Considerations**

When conducting human research, especially a research on effects of child sexual abuse, the researchers have the responsibility to conform to a morally acceptable code of conduct, as determined by the scientific community. Researchers respected the participants’ right to privacy, the identity or any identifying particulars of the participants remained anonymous throughout the study. All participants were made aware of the research aims and the researchers ensured that the participants understood the research aims. Participants signed a letter of informed consent that allows the researchers to use the information gathered for the research purposes. Permission was also sought from the participants’ parents, headmasters, teachers who participated in this study and also the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The majority of respondents agree that sexual abuse makes the victim to perform poorly at school. Four (4) teachers from School A, School B and School C cited a deteriorating or inconsistency in their performance after the abuse they also cited absent mindedness and lack of confidence, difficulty in grasping concepts, low participation during oral lessons and unwillingness to take part in co-curricular activities. TMSA said that some children dropped out of school as a result of CSA. He further hinted, “Once they become intimate the next stage is to get married”. TF1SB indicated that they show a negative attitude towards school work rendering them to perform very poor. She further highlighted that most of their time is spent thinking about whether the abuse is going to be repeated again.

TMSC indicated that mark schedules before discovery of abuse and after discovery of abuse for affected pupils in four subject areas, Maths, Content, English and Shona which he had scrutinised showed a drop in academic performance.

All school A, B and C teachers suggest that almost all of the sexually abused pupils had significant change in performance at school after cases of CSA were discovered. 33.3 percent of the respondent had different views. TF2SB said that she had taught a boy who had been sexually abused but his academic performance was never affected. He remained one of her best students even after the discovery of the abuse. But generally most of the abused pupils I have taught had suffered a negative impact on their academic performance she lamented. TFSA had mixed feelings. She said it depended on the nature and extent of the abuse. She said in Shona “mwana akangotaurwa naye akava nepekugara pakanaka ha taatani kukangamwa (if a child is counselled and given a safe place to stay he/she will forget about the abuse). I personally believe that time heals everything.” She further showed her mixed feelings when she further said “at the same time I think it all depends who has abused the child, if its someone like a parent or another sibling it can prove to be difficult for the child and hence academic performance can be affected as these are the same people she/he will be with for the rest of her/his life.”

TFSA said that when a person’s mind/emotional state is affected it also affects his concentration span during lessons which in turn affects the academic results. TF2SB indicated that CSA had a negative effect on academic performance and many a time children who would have been sexually abused don’t focus their thoughts on school activities but rather on activities of the abuse they are going through.
The general consensus among the six (6) teachers who were interviewed was that academic performance is negatively affected after sexual abuse, some children were said to be absent from school many times, others began to have health problems such that they missed school or if they attend they spend most of their time sleeping in class. TMSC also highlighted that some students failed to copy with their studies and remained in the same grade.

During the interview with the teachers from schools A, B and C it was highlighted that there were a plethora of variables that also affected academic performance despite CSA. They indicated that factors from within (intrinsic) and from outside (extrinsic) the child had an influence on learning. Four (4) teachers identified other factors to include, home factors, school factors, health of child and disability. We no longer have incentives this effects on our performance as teachers as we lack the motivation”. TF1SB said “poverty can reflect badly on one’s academic performance. Some children don’t even have school uniforms or the required stationery and worse still few schools nowadays have text books”.

Views expressed by all six (6) teachers showed that victims of CSA either show inconsistency in their score or deterioration in performance, but four (4) of them indicated low performance. This concurs with Ah Hing (2010) who postulates that children who are being sexually violated often lose interest in many of their daily activities, including the drive to succeed in school activities, both in the classroom and extramurally. TMSA said that some children dropped out of school as a result of CSA. He further hinted that once they become intimate the next stage is to get married. TF1SB indicated that they show a negative attitude towards school work rendering them to perform very poor. She further highlighted that most of their time is spent thinking about whether the abuse is going to be repeated again. TMSC indicated that mark schedules before discovery of abuse and after discovery of abuse for affected pupils in four subject areas, Maths, Content, English and Shona which he had scrutinised showed a drop in academic performance.

A study was conducted which evidenced that being sexually abused as a child, has a profound effect on the ability of children to perform academically, (De Witt, 2009; Louw, et al., 2007). This could be because of the fact that the children lack confidence, have difficulty grasping concepts, stressed and do not participate fully in class, as indicated by the respondents. Mwamwenda (2010) concluded that a child who felt more confident and more self-assured would perform better in the primary learning examinations. Ah Hing (2010) suggest that a sexually abused child may feel awful, resulting in low self-esteem and poor self-image, which in turn lead to poor performance. Children who have been sexually abused suffer from stress and stress has an insidious effect on learning and behaviour (Jeynes, 2007:39). Chronic stress is linked to over 50% of all absence from school (Duncan, et al., 2008), impairs attention and concentration (Bakare, 2011:455), reduces cognition, creativity, and memory (Books, 2004), and diminishes social skills and social judgement (Jeynes, 2007:105). It also reduces motivation, determination, and effort (Johnson, 2007:6), increases the likelihood of depression (Evans, 2004:81), and reduces neurogenesis (the growth of new brain cells) (Chilman, 2001:196).

The education of the child is adversely affected by the abuse and disrupted to the point where the child is unable to focus his attention in school effectively enough in order to cope with the educational demands made of him (Louw & Louw, 2007: 22). This is in line with Chinoyoka (2013) who pointed out that victims may withdraw from school and social activities and exhibit various learning and behavioural problems. In its studies, WHO(2002), found out that sometimes a sexually abused child comes in late to school, sleeps through the class period or pays no attention in the classroom leading to low grades or failure.

Another possible reason could be that the sexually abused child may be pre occupied with issues that are a threat to his/her life, particularly where the sexual abuse occurs repeatedly or where the perpetrator is a family member. If the child’s basic needs of safety and security are not met, as propounded by Maslow’s hierarchy of need, it might be difficult for such a child to make meaningful achievement in class. Lack of concentration, day dreaming, aggression, shyness and failure to mix with others all affect the child’s concentration resulting in poor performance. According to Bronfenbrenner’s theory, it is clear that CSA occurring in one of the layers may cause a ripple effect throughout the other layers, influencing the child’s relationships and interactions. That means that if sexual abuse takes place in the microsystems, it may impact on the child’s functioning in the meso, exo, macro and chronosystems. This is supported by Donald et al(2010:37) who purport that things that happen in one part of the system can affect other parts and ultimately the ecological system as a whole, as explained in the work of Bronfenbrenner.

It should be noted that the state of health of the children can enhance ability of the learner or it can become the barrier to effective learning. Many children who have under gone CSA suffer from a psychologically or medically related problem which may occasionally
remove them from school to get help. Zimbabwean education is result oriented and many a time the teacher may find it difficult to assist the child fully when they return to school. The teacher pupil ratio is around 1:55 in government schools. To think that the teacher will carry the burden of one child may be a rare development. CSA has resulted in the drop out from school by pupils due to poor health and even pregnancy. Some children have fled away from the home and become street children where they are exposed to other forms of abuse.

TMSA and other participants of FGD indicated that some children dropped out of school as a result of sexual abuse. This shows that CSA has negative effect on the learner with serious effects on academic performance as it has led to school dropouts due to early marriages or pregnancies. Some children are relocated to safe places to stay with other relatives where they may not go to school. Some students have reported a high rate of absenteeism due to poor health or attending courts or counselling sessions. Some children began to shun school due to stigmatisation and labelling. The researcher has experienced through her work as teacher and counsellor that labels do stick and have a self-fulfilling prophesy. Children who are given negative labels by the teacher usually perform as the label ascribes. Haralambos & Holborn, (2010), where it’s claimed that a proponent of the labelling and self-fulfilling prophecy argues that by perceiving certain learners in this way, the teachers experience problems in working with them, if teacher applies a label on the child, on the basis of his perception and evaluation of child’s conduct at school. Where a pupil is evaluated favourably, a positive label is applied, and the pupil is regarded as conforming to the teacher’s expectations. On the other hand, where the evaluation is unfavourable, where a negative label is applied, the pupil is regarded as a deviant.

TF2SB said that she had taught a boy who had been sexually abused but his academic performance was never affected. He remained one of her best students even after the discovery of the abuse. But generally most of the abused pupils I have taught had suffered a negative impact on their academic performance she lamented. TFSA had missed feelings. She said it depended on the nature and extent of the abuse. She said in Shona “mwana akangotaurwa naye akava nepekugara pakanaka haattani kukangamwa (if a child is counselled and given a safe place to stay he/she will forget about the abuse). I personally believe that time heals everything. This concurs with Bernard (2012: 15) who cited that resilient children have high expectations, a meaning for life, goals, personal agency, and interpersonal problem-solving skills. This is supported by Ah Hing (2010) who alludes that not every child who is sexually abused will experience academic problems at school since some children who focus their attention on school activities, and as a result, become high achievers. Hall and Lloyd (1993: 92) also state that some sexually abused children become high academic achievers because they channel all their energies into focusing on their schoolwork as a coping and compensating mechanism. They believed once the issue is addressed amicably, the victim can move on with her life. In line with the above Gadziwa (2013) who found out those children who received supportive responses following disclosure had less traumatic symptoms.

TFSA eluded that once a person’s mind or emotional state is affected his/her concentration in turn is affected. This augurs well with psychodynamic theories where Freud purports that all unpleasant experiences are housed in the unconscious mind and trying to retrieve them causes anxiety and stress. When one is not at peace with them no self-actualisation can take place and hence academic performance is negatively affected.

The teachers from School A, school B and school C also cited a plethora of variables which can also affect academic performance despite CSA. One such variable is Childhood poverty which according to Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, (2007) is associated with higher rates of academic failure or grade retention and higher incidences of school drop-out (Connell, 2010). Mwamwenda (2010) concluded that a child who felt more confident and more self-assured would perform better in the primary learning examinations. Other factors include, home factors, school factors, health of child and disability. Childhood poverty is associated with higher rates of academic failure or grade retention (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 2007) and higher incidences of school drop-out (Connell, 2010). A study by UNICEF (2014) established that many schools lack textbooks and other supplies that enhance academic performance.

The researcher agrees that there are other variables that can affect academic performance despite CSA. In the communities where this research was conducted the housing accommodation is overcrowded and could be conclusive that the environment was not suitable for studying. Most families were self-employed thereby leaving a lot of household chores for the children to do. Children also assisted parents sell at flea markets or door to door in streets. The culture of reading was not instilled in the children from home. The level of education of parents can be an advantage for a learner if the parents are well educated they understand the
importance and true value of education and hence assist their children with their homework and regular visits to the school, making check-ups on child’s progress. Some children who have dropped out of school have been a result of lack of school fees. It should be noted however that some children excel against all odds.

A deteriorated or inconsistency in classroom performance that was noted from the study was evidence of effects of CSA on the child’s academic performance. It has been widely documented that the academic performance of CSA victims generally deteriorates as time passes and the abuse continues. The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that CSA has a negative effect on the way a child learns and performs in class. This can be because of low participation, low self-esteem, and poor self-image and absent mindedness reportedly often shown by the affected children during lessons. However, it was noted that there are some children who are resilient and will still make it to the top despite having being sexually abused.

RECOMMENDATIONS
Teachers should also carefully offer more support and encouragement to the sexually abused children and give them remedial lessons without unnecessarily drawing attention to them. Independence and confidence can also be inculcated in the children through giving them responsibilities in the classroom. They can be made group leaders or class monitors so that they experience the success of being able to lead others.

In classroom situations teachers need to strike a balance between protecting the child from stigmatisation and offering meaningful help to ease the child’s plight. There is need to encourage the affected child to confide in the teacher and the latter to listen patiently so that through discussing a way of assisting the child can be found without unnecessarily labelling him/her.

The State must allocate funds to make the relevant Ministries fully functional and provide an overseer role in the formulation and implementation of policies that are protective of children. Schools should offer an open, proactive and supportive environment and include programmes that are aimed at educating children about CSA. Such programmes should start from nursery school. Since counselling is one of the solutions to problems of CSA there is need to find out as a follow up to this study, whether schools offer such facilities and whether they are functional and effective. Last but not least, churches and traditional leaders should be taken on board in the fight against CSA.

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