

# Effects of Child Abuse on the Academic Performance of Primary School Learners in the Manzini Region, Swaziland

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of child abuse on the academic performance of primary school learners in the Manzini Region of Swaziland. The study was qualitative in nature and utilised the phenomenological research design. The target population were the abused learners from the Manzini primary schools. Data were collected from 15 abused learners and their class teachers in four schools. The critical case purposive sampling method was used to select these schools. Thus, only those schools that had abused learners were selected. Semi-structured interviews, focus group discussion and document analysis were used to collect data. The findings showed that a majority of the abused learners underperformed as a result of abuse and became suspicious of every person around them and this had a negative bearing to their academic performance. Some became antisocial and adopted a misdirected, rancorous attitude to everyone around them. Thus in the main, the study concludes that child abuse affects the academic performance of learners at primary school level. Based on the findings, the study recommends that the stakeholders; parents, school administrators and teachers included, should work hand-in-hand in handling abused learners in order to help them overcome their challenges and improve their academic performance and social life. In addition to that, the relevant ministries (Police, Child and Social Welfare and the Ministry of Education and Training) should assist in curbing child abuse at grassroots level.

**Keywords:** *child abuse; academic performance; anti social*

## 1. Introduction

Child abuse is one of the most challenging social catastrophes attracting public attention the world over (Alokan & Olatunji, 2014). According to Moss and Moss (1999) child abuse is any act of omission by parents, guardians or any caregivers that results in non-accidental physical or mental injury, or sexual abuse. In addition, Denga and Denga (2007) state that cruel behaviour on children by teachers, parents, peers, guardians, siblings and the society in general constitute child abuse. The researchers observe that Swaziland is not spared of this evil phenomenon, hence the need to carry out a study of this nature. Child abuse takes place in the home environment, at school, in church, hospitals, orphanages and in any place; public or private. In the light of this therefore, Augustine and Abubaker (2016) lamented that there is no safe place for children anymore because child abuse is rampant everywhere.

In Swaziland education is a fundamental human right and is considered as pivotal to the development of the self and the nation at large (Ministry of Education and Training, 2011). The United Nations views education as a basic human right and an instrument for achieving social equality and higher economic development (UNICEF, 2008). However, in spite of the important role of education, the researchers observe that many children are not participating to full capacity in the education offered by the school system due to various challenges ranging from child labour, children heading families, poverty and child abuse (UNICEF, 2008).

The researchers observe that child abuse in Swaziland is rampant and is typically perpetrated by some relatives of these children. In particular, sexual abuse is more prevalent in the country while physical and emotional abuse sometimes co-exists with sexual abuse. A study on forms of child abuse among children attending selected primary schools in Swaziland revealed that approximately 40 per cent of this population experienced some form of child

abuse during their lifetime (Vilakazi, Mamba, Ndlangamandla, Kanduzi&Zungu, 2003). However, in some certain quotas of the Swazi society, abuse against children in the country is still veiled in obscurity (*tibitendlu*) “*Family secrets*” and because of this, little is done to assist the victims/survivors. The abused children, who often try to report such incidences, are often failed by the justice system which do very little to no action in apprehending and prosecuting the perpetrators. Thus, this study sought to investigate the effect of child abuse on the academic performance of the abused grade seven learners in the Manzini primary schools of Swaziland.

## 2. Statement of the Problem

As stated above, child abuse is rampant in schools, in homes and the Swazi society at large. The Ministry of Education and Training has set rules and regulations to guide teachers in protecting learners against abuse but such cases are still on the rise. In addition to that, the Government of Swaziland has put in place a toll free number (9664) in an attempt to curb and apprehend the perpetrators. However, it seems this does not lessen its occurrence. The Swaziland Action Group Against Abuse (SWAGAA) has reported that they have received 266 cases of child abuse between January and October 2015. This is quite a alarming figure considering that there are so many cases which go unreported. Many of the abused children are not empowered to report such cases. The Children’s Act (2012) has also been put in place to sensitise the public from this degrading human treatment. In his study, Mndzebele (2009) has also observed that cases of abuse in the schools are still on the rise and some abused learners drop in academic performance. Despite government and non-governmental organizations’ efforts to combat this antisocial behaviour and to sensitise the public on the rights of children, the phenomenon is still prevalent in the Swazi community and it impacts on learners’ academic performance of the victims.

## 3. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study were to:

1. Find out the effects of child abuse on the academic performance of primary school learners.
2. Explore how experiences of child abuse affect the learners’ participation in class.
3. Identify behaviour characteristics of the abused learners in class.

## 4. Literature Review

A review of literature was done to check the trends of child abuse the world over. This assisted the researchers to identify gaps in literature which this study sought to close. Before a major review of literature is presented, the researchers presented the theoretical framework which guided this study.

## 5. Theoretical Framework

This study started off by looking at the theoretical framework which was used to guide this study. For that reason, the Social Learning Theory by Albert Bandura (1977) was deemed the most appropriate theory to frame this study. Bandura’s theory explains the process by which an individual learns behaviour from his/her environment.

### 5.1 The Social Learning Theory

According to Bandura (1977) behaviour is learned from the environment through the process of observational learning. Unlike Skinner, Bandura believed that humans are active information processors and reflect on the relationship between behaviours and its consequences. Children observe people around them behaving in various ways and model that behaviour. The social learning theory assumes that children learn a great deal through observation and imitation and may learn behaviours from parents, teachers, peers and/or community models. The environment, in which children live therefore, becomes critical and children are likely to learn even negative behaviour. The social learning theory is useful in explaining how people learn new things and develop new behaviours by observing other people, particularly, the significant other. This theory is relevant to this study as it is assumed that child abuse is culturally transmitted in some sections of the Swazi society. Child abuse is a learned practice and abused children are more likely to become child abusers in their adult life (Bandura, 1977). According to this theory, maladaptive behaviour is a result of dysfunctional learning. Maladaptive responses can be learned as a result of direct exposure to inadequate or “sick” models within the child’s environment. Whichever form of child abuse children undergo; makes them learn that aggression is a correct way of solving problems and is an acceptable way of life.

### *5.2 Effects of Child Abuse on Academic Performance*

Rew (1999) found out that child maltreatment is widely considered as responsible for a negative effect on children's academic achievement. Abused students tend to have less concentration span in class. Alokun and Olatunji (2014) carried a study on the influence of child abuse on classroom behaviour and academic performance among primary and secondary school learners in the Etiki State of Nigeria. All teachers in primary and secondary schools in both public and private sectors in Ado local government area of Etiki State in Nigeria were targeted for the study. The study found out that there is a significant relationship between children's active involvement in parents' business and their attitude to classwork. Based on the findings, it was recommended; among others things that the effects of child abuse on children's classroom behaviour and later academic performance should receive attention in education policy forum; and that parents should always relate to their children with love and affection and also provide for their needs. In schools, these symptoms manifest themselves through students' inability to concentrate, complete school work in time, or understand schoolwork; being fearful, frustrated, stupid or bad about themselves; achieving low grades; and or being told they are lazy or slow (Larkin, 2009).

### *5.3 Child Abuse and Classroom Participation*

Child participation in class is positively related to academic achievement (Ladd, Bush & Seid, 2000; Finn, 1999; Finn, 1993). Children in the primary grades can fail to participate in class activities due to abuse, lack of interest, inattentiveness or different kinds of learning problems. The student who finds it difficult to study, memorise, respond to teacher's questions or display other participatory behaviour is more likely to get low marks in different school subjects. Shonk and Cicchetti (2001) assert that child maltreatment can influence children's performance of competencies (e.g. engagement in academic tasks and paying attention in the classroom).

### *5.4 Behavioural Characteristics of Abused Learners in the Classroom*

A number of studies done around the world show that physically abused children have been found to be more highly aggressive than the non abused children. These children are also prone to oppositional behaviour like fighting, delinquency and criminality (Dodge & Eckenrode, 1995). These children end up being self-injurious, suicidal, substance abusers, and may have emotional problems and difficulties in peer relationships (Kolko, 1996). Perry (2012) posited that these behaviours and difficulties are likely to be manifested in school problems related to classroom underachievement, fighting with peers and oppositional defiance toward teachers. Children affected by neglect tend to be more isolated at school compared to other groups of children and have difficulty making friends (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002). This agrees with Albert Bandura's social learning theory and therefore, this theory was appropriate to frame this study.

## **6. Methodology and Sampling Procedure**

This study is qualitative which used the phenomenological research design. The critical case purposive sampling method was used to select the schools which had the required characteristics and those that were accessible to the researchers. Thus, four (4) primary schools from the Manzini region were selected. From these four schools, sixteen (16) abused learners were selected and these came from four grades selected from each of the participating schools. This makes a total of sixteen (16) grades 2 to 7 learners. To achieve this, a critical case purposive sampling method was used to select only the abused cases. Class teachers of the selected abused learners were also selected to participate in this study since it was assumed that these had rich information about the children's performance and behaviour.

## **7. Data Collection Methods**

Interviews were conducted by the researchers within the schools of the abused participants. This was done to ensure that the environment was not changed and the learners are in their comfortable places. Before the interviews, the purpose of the exercise was clarified to the members of the Parents Teachers Association who concerted for the learners since they were minors. The same was done to the participants who were assured that this was just a study and information collected from each participant would remain anonymous. The researchers then used face-face interviews with the four pupils from each of the participating schools. Open-ended questions were used which enabled the researchers to get direct quotations from the participants about their experiences, opinions, attitudes, feelings and knowledge about child abuse and academic performance. Thereafter, learners were counselled to ensure that this exercised does not open the healing wounds but rather, assist in the healing process. Class teachers partook in focus group discussions and these were conducted within the premises of the participating schools for the same reasons. Thus,

two focus group discussions were conducted by the researchers with the class teachers of the abused pupils.

To augment data collected through the interviews and focus group discussions, document analysis was also used as a data collection method. In doing so, the researchers also utilised the abused learners' exercise books, tests and examination scores. The tests and examination scores were solicited from the class teachers of the abused learners to ascertain their performance in comparison with the non abused pupils and also to compare the performance of these learners before the abuse and after the abuse. Data were analysed using the thematic analysis method whereby collected data were categorised into emerging themes. Participants were also quoted verbatim.

## 8. Findings

### 8.1 *The Effects of Child Abuse on the Academic Performance of Learners in Primary Schools*

The findings revealed that most (47%) of the learners experienced physical abuse and only (20%) experienced emotional and verbal abuse whilst a minority of (13%) experienced sexual abuse. The findings of the study indicated that (65%) of the learners scored low in their tests, classwork and in examinations due to abuse. To support the above statements, one learner revealed this:

*I was among the best performing learners in the class and could score not less than 90% especially in Mathematics and SiSwati. However, after the incident of sexual abuse by my uncle I am affected such that I sometimes leave some sentences and words incomplete.*

Teachers on the other hand also concurred with the students concerns as one of the class teachers explained that abused learners are not doing well in class and that a certain boy in her class who is a victim is always restless. She remarked and said, "*The victim in my class is restless. He would move from one learner to another bullying and disturbing them*". However, the study also revealed that some learners are not academically affected by the abuse they experience and thus their academic performance is not bad. The teacher said:

*If it's time for any revision exercise or learning time in class, this girl is so dedicated and makes contributions in a way that she goes an extra mile to assist other learners who have difficulties. She gets good grades on tests and is the best in my class. She is actually a fighter.*

In addition to that, the findings further indicated that 25% of the learners were not affected academically as they stated that they score high marks in the tests and examinations. In support of the above statement one participant had this to say: *It depends, sometimes I work on my schoolwork in the morning if mom had hurt me, it does affect me especially at home when I am doing home work and I have learnt to ignore her reactions. I have to fight this abuse otherwise it may destroy me and my future.*

However, some of the class teachers of the abused learners reported that the academic performance of the abused learners is affected because the learners begin to pay less attention to school work. They pay attention to the painful experiences of abuse. Hence, they neglect assignments and do not put maximum effort when writing tests. They also reported to have observed that abused learners are not doing well and repeat grades. Some abused learners always absent themselves and thus dropping in their academic performance. Some teachers indicated that the performance of abused learners is dropping drastically and the abused learners cannot be free. They were reported not to be participating well in class discussions and do not respond promptly when asked questions and one can tell that they minds are paying attention to something else. One teacher had this to say:

*The girl in my class had changed totally. She submits incomplete work or sometimes omits words when constructing sentences. She is now a quiet person in the class and looks reserved which makes her contribute less in class activities (Teacher Participant 2).*

On the same note another teacher said:

*In my class, there is a learner who is trying hard but you can tell that he has psychological problems because each time you point at him to work out a problem on the board, he would go, but suddenly, he would say he has forgotten. He has changed completely (Teacher Participant 10).*

In this study, the teachers reported that some learners, once abused, their academic performance begin to deteriorate. Others have problems in doing home work. Teachers' reports concurred with the reports from their abused learners. Another teacher had this to say:

*You just wonder how these learners survive! Imagine, they are abused where we think they are safe. For instance, I have a problem with a girl who has just developed sleeping habits in class and I thought it was*

*laziness. But when I learned that she was an abused case, I was shocked*(Teacher Participant 1).

### 8.2 Experiences of Child Abuse and Its Effects on the Learners' Participation in Class

The study also revealed that cases of abuse in the primary schools are well known yet very little is done. The teacher participants in this study reported that the experiences of abused learners have led to loss of concentration in class. The result was that many of the abused learners lag behind in their school work. The study also showed that abuse among the survivors was also responsible for poor classroom participation. Thus, 70% of the abused learners indicated that they failed to concentrate in class due to the experiences of abuse which always cross their minds and haunts them. One participant had this to say: *"Ever since I was abused, I lose concentration in class and once the teacher brings in a stick, I am not at ease. My heart melts of fear. I don't think of anything else other than that the teacher is going to flex his muscles on me. As a result, I lose focus and I don't participate in class. I pay more attention to my worries"*.

One participant who was sexually abused by an uncle revealed that she is living under perpetual fear at home. She remarked:

*I have pain on my private parts and had a running stomach at night. Abuse disturbed me seriously because I fail to concentrate in class and do my home-work. The whole ordeal is haunting me. Worse still, the person who is supposed to help me with my home work is my abuser and I do not want to be close to him. I have developed fear of all males; including my teacher and all my male class mates*(Child Participant 1 from School 2).

On this issue, generally, this study found out that abused children are haunted by the abusive experiences they went/go through. Once abused, the children develop abnormal behaviour and fail to participate freely and actively in class. Some participants revealed that after being abused, it became difficult for them to do school work at home or to make contributions in group discussions and taking the initiative during the learning process in class. One learner participant said *"I don't participate in class because I just feel that everybody knows that I was abused and they think that I have AIDS. My esteem is at its lowest now and I am not confident any more. I am shy and I prefer hiding behind others in class."* One could tell from the way the participant expressed herself that she has developed a low self-esteem and a negative self-regard although she loved her school work.

### 8.3 Behaviour Characteristics of the Abused Learners in Class

The results of the study revealed that victims of abuse would begin to absent themselves from school. Some developed some form of emotional instability, short temperedness, aggressive and bully behaviour. Some teacher participants reported that some pupils have developed a solitary type of life where they no longer play with other kids at school and they have anger and hatred harboured in them. This is just misdirected aggression because these survivors of abuse are hurt. Some have lost hope about life and have developed a low self esteem. One teacher had this to say with reference to an abused learner in her class: *The boy would always be found beating other children and stealing other learners' belongings like pocket money.*

The findings of the study revealed that abused learners developed abnormal behaviours that affected their academic performance. One participant had this to say:

*My behaviour has dramatically changed since my abuse. I easily get irritated. I always suspect that everyone wants to take advantage of me and I become aggressive and bully if teased by my schoolmates. Of late, I have adopted hurt speech.*

This indicates that abused learners' behaviour significantly changes and this can lead to severe behavioural consequences such as contact disorder. Some become defensive or they want to revenge; thereby directing their aggression to a wrong person. Some abused learners also develop withdrawal from certain school activities due to their experiences. Another learner participant who was sexually abused reported that: *"My friends are complaining that I'm now reserved and don't play with them. They also laugh at me about my performance in tests. I am afraid to tell them about what my uncle does to me."*

Absenteeism was another behaviour problem which came out of the study. One of the abused learners had this to say: *"I would leave home in the morning and hide along the way to school and then join others when they are coming from school as if I had also been to school. I do this because other learners laugh at me. They say I have a bad smell. This came after I was raped"*. This report indicates that abused learners are traumatised and this affects their academic performance as it interferes with their learning programme. Therefore, the effect of child abuse on the academic performance of primary school children cannot be over emphasised. This study has shown that child abuse has a negative effect on the academic performance of primary school learners.

#### 8.4 Results from Document Analysis

To augment data collected through the interviews and focus groups, the researchers also utilised document analysis as a source of data. Hence, they requested for test marks and exam marks from the class teachers who participated in the study. This was done in order to see how the abused learners were faring before abuse and how they are doing after abuse. Also of interest, was to analyse the scores of the abused learners in comparison to those of the non-abused learners. The results from document analysis revealed that a significant number of the abused learners were performing below class average. When this was compared to how the learners fared before abuse, it was noted that there is a significant decline now. This confirmed what the abused learners said during the interviews. Document analysis also revealed that there were so many gaps in the abused learners' mark profiles and this showed that at times they would not partake in the class tests nor would do the home works done by other learners in their respective classes. The researchers were also interested in reading their composition exercise books. Interestingly, majority of them wrote about the most cruel person, cruel experiences and/or people they hated most. One grade two learner drew a picture of an ugly woman with horns, big eyes, long hands and carrying a big stick. When the child was interrogated; she said it was her step mother who likes beating her all the time.

### 9. Discussions

The results of this study showed that child abuse affects the academic performance of learners. The abused learners who participated in this study indicated that due to abuse, they now get low scores in tests, exams and class work. Some of them would not write all the tests and examinations given to them, owing to abuse. In addition to that, some abused participants in this study believed that the experiences of abuse led them to repeat classes. Since abused learners may find themselves missing classes, tests and/or examinations; they were bound to underperform in their studies as they will be lagging in fulfilling school requirements. The findings of this study agree with those of Eckenrode, Laird and Doris (2003) who stated that there are cognitive implications of child abuse and this include difficulties in learning and academic performance. One participant learner indicated that before abuse, he was performing better but he dropped in his performance after being a victim of abuse. Rew (1999) is in concurrence with this observation when he argued that child maltreatment is widely accepted as having a negative effect on children's academic achievement.

Bad experiences always crossed the abused children's minds during lessons and the result is divided attention. The abused learners in this study revealed that they paid more attention to their painful experiences and fail to concentrate to their school work. This impacted on their full concentration and participation in class. Home work was normally not done since some of them were supposed to be assisted by their relatives; who happen to be their abusers. Hildyard and Wolfe (2002) also noted that abused children tend to be more isolated at school compared to other groups of children and have difficulty making friends. Conoley (2005) concurs with the results of this study when he revealed that child abuse impacts on the child's academic performance in various ways, including reduced cognitive capacity, sleep disturbance (causing poor concentration), difficulties in memory, language delays, understanding and expressing. The result is poor performance in class work and low achievement in tests. Also, Turner and Tanner (2005) agree with these findings when they noted a link between child abuse and poor performance at school, associated exclusions and repeat years.

In this study, it was found out that some children were also used as a source of cheap labour. One participant reported to have been collecting construction stones for his father and would be caught sleeping in class during lessons. His class teacher reported that the learner missed a lot and ended up repeating the grade. Participating teachers in the study also revealed that some abused learners tend to sleep in class and show signs of fatigue most of the time. Eckenrode, Laird and Doris (2003) concur with the findings and stated that abused children are more likely to repeat a grade, do poorly on cognitive tests and have discipline problems in school.

The study showed that abused learners are affected emotionally and they spend much of their time meditating on their situation. They feel rejected and forsaken by the entire society and hence see no need to spend their time on books. Consequently they go into self-imposed solitary confinement which affects their academic performance. Some of them have anger and are eager to revenge. Hence, quite often this anger is misdirected to innocent classmates who normally suffer from this misdirected retributive aggressive behaviour which may come in form of both hurt language, verbal and physical assault.

The class teachers in this study revealed that learners tend to be aggressive and bully such that they find out that abused learners are also discipline problem children. They vent out their anger by beating other learners and could be constantly living under fear due to abuse. Generally, abused children in this study reported to have developed abnormal

behaviour and always angry to other learners and have mistrust and hatred to people around them, thus, becoming bully. The same observation was also made by Hildyard and Wolfe(2002) and Holt, Buckely and Whelan (2008) when they stated that neglected children may also display aggressive and disruptive behaviour. Thus, in a nutshell, the study showed that child abuse affected the academic performance of primary school learners in Manzini region of Swaziland.

## 10. Conclusions

- Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that the abused learners tend to absent themselves from class, lose concentration and focus on their abusive experiences. They also do not participate in class discussions or other class activities. Thus they find themselves having to repeat grades.
- It was also concluded that the abused learners in this study paid more attention to their painful experiences and fail to concentrate to their school work. This affected their full participation in class. Some of them tend to sleep in class and show signs of fatigue most of the time.
- Another conclusion drawn from the study is that an abused child develops bad behaviour such as bullying other learners and has hatred to people surrounding him/her. These learners are often discipline problem children. They prefer solitary environments. Hence, academic achievement declines due to low concentration and divided attention.

## 11. Recommendations for Action

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations were made:

- Teachers should pay special attention to identify forms of abuse and support abused learners. Upon identification of the abused learners, teachers should report such cases to the police.
- Abused learners should be referred to professional counsellors for counselling. Abused learners need many counselling sessions for them to cope with their situations. Counselling is not a once off activity.
- Some abused learners should be referred to health institutions for medical assistance.
- The Ministry of Education and Training should ensure that teachers are equipped with counselling skills. This can be done by introducing short courses on counselling or ensure that such courses are compulsory at teachers' training institutions.
- Where such cases are reported, school administrations should invite professional counsellors to assist abused learners in their healing process.
- The abused learners should be provided with extra remedial classes to assist them catch up academically.
- Parents, school administrators, teachers should work hand-in-hand in handling abused learners in order to help them improve academically.

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