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## The nature, extent and effects of emotional abuse on primary school pupils by teachers in Zimbabwe

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### Abstract

**Objective:** The study seeks to determine the nature, extent and effects of emotional abuse; and who the perpetrators are in Zimbabwean primary schools.

**Method:** Data collection was twofold because this involved reported cases of emotional abuse and the use of two questionnaires to collect data on the forms of emotional abuse perpetrated on pupils by teachers. First, data of reported cases of emotional abuse were collected from six regional offices of the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture in Zimbabwe. The rationale was to determine forms of emotional abuse perpetrated on pupils by teachers in Zimbabwean primary schools. Second, the Teacher Trainees Questionnaire and the Teacher Questionnaire were administered to randomly selected samples of 150 primary school teacher trainees and 300 primary school teachers. Random numbers were used in the selection of the teachers and teacher trainees. The rationale for using teachers and teacher trainees was to make an in-depth analysis of the forms of emotional abuse perpetrated on pupils by teachers and to determine who the perpetrators are in this form of child abuse. In this study, emotional abuse shall refer to constant belittling of a pupil, the absence of a positive emotional atmosphere, verbal abuse, shouting, scolding, use of vulgar language, humiliation and negative labeling of pupils, and terrorizing of pupils by teachers in schools.

**Results:** The study found that the majority of teacher trainees and teachers believe that shouting, scolding, use of vulgar language, humiliation and negatively labeling of pupils as stupid, ugly, foolish is mainly done by female teachers in schools. However, 52.7% of the teacher trainees indicated that it is the male teachers who “use vulgar language on pupils.” This study found some of the forms of emotional abuse that are perpetrated on pupils by teachers in schools. The findings seem to be consistent with the literature available on the gender of perpetrators associated with this form of child abuse.

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**Conclusion:** It is clear that emotional abuse exists in Zimbabwean primary schools and female teachers appear to be the main perpetrators of this form of child abuse. This form of child abuse may involve one perpetrator and a series of victims.

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*Keywords:* Emotional abuse; Teachers; Teacher trainees; Perceptions; Schools

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## Introduction

Research available shows that emotional abuse is considered as one of the most devastating form of child abuse than sexual abuse and physical abuse (Brassard, Germain, & Hart, 1987; Garbarino, 1978; Garbarino & Garbarino, 1986; Shengold, 1989) because of its traumatic effects on the development of children. Other evidence show that most studies in this area have concentrated on its definition (Besharov, 1981; Hart, 1987; Hart, Germain, & Brassard, 1983; O'Brian & Lau, 1995; O'Hagan, 1995). However, most researchers on emotional abuse allude to the fact that there is no one agreed definition and hence what *is* and *is not* emotional abuse varies from culture to culture (Dean, 1979; Doyle, 1997; Melton & Corson, 1987; O'Brian & Lau, 1995). In their study, O'Brian and Lau (1995) of a Chinese sample in Hong Kong, found that public humiliation of children is part of the child-rearing practices and is meant to scare the would-be-culprits. Hart et al. (1983) found that emotional abuse damages immediately or ultimately the behavioral, cognitive, affective, social, and physiological functioning of the child.

In their most recent study of 471 patients with a history of sexual abuse, physical abuse, or intense verbal childhood trauma, McLean Hospital Researchers (2000) found four types of abnormalities that are caused by abuse, and emotional abuse to be linked to permanent damage of the developing brain. The four types of brain abnormalities that they found are limbic irritability, arrested development of the left hemisphere, deficient integration between the left and right hemispheres, and increased verbal activity. According to the McLean Hospital Researchers, neglect and trauma increase production of cortisol and decrease production of the thyroid hormone which affect the development of neurochemical and neurotransmitter receptors in the hippocampus, amygdala and locus coeruleus, parts of the brain that regulate fear and anxiety. McLean Hospital Researchers found that stress and neglect experienced early in life to be linked to fear, anxiety, and stress developed by children.

Despite the overwhelming research on emotional abuse, there are still very few studies that have examined this form of child abuse within the classroom (Krugman & Krugman, 1984). The only known comprehensive study to have examined emotional abuse within the school context was carried out by Krugman and Krugman (1984), who observed 17 elementary pupils who were emotionally abused by their teacher. The following behaviors of the teacher were reported by the victims: harassment; verbal put-downs; labeling (stupid, dummy); inconsistent erratic behavior; screaming at children until they cried; inappropriate threats to try to control classroom; allowing some children to harass and belittle others; use of homework as punishment; throwing homework at children and physical punishment. In this study, pupils were found to exhibit the following symptoms: excessive worry about school performance

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