

# Impact of Child Abuse on Learner's Academic Performance: A Case of Selected Primary Schools in Lusaka District, Zambia

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8246293>

Published Date: 14-August-2023

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**Abstract:** Child abuse simply refers to the physical maltreatment or sexual molestation of a child. In the current world societies, cases of child abuse are rapidly increasing daily and this issue of child mistreatment have endangered many children's physical, emotional and health development. Child abuse (also called child endangerment or child maltreatment) is physical, sexual, and/or psychological maltreatment or neglect of a child or children, especially by a parent or a caregiver. Child abuse may include any act or failure to act by a parent or a caregiver that results in actual or potential harm to a child and can occur in a child's home, or in the organizations, schools, or communities the child interacts with. The terms child abuse and child maltreatment are often used interchangeably, although some researchers make a distinction between them, treating child maltreatment as an umbrella term to cover neglect, exploitation, and trafficking. Nonetheless, this research study focused on the impact of child abuse on learner's academic performance in primary selected schools of Lusaka District, Zambia. The study employed both the qualitative and quantitative methods and a descriptive survey design that sampled head teachers, teachers, parents and the pupils. Data was obtained from the respondents by means of interviews and questionnaires. Percentages, tables, graphs and pie-charts were used and data was then analyzed by the use of software MS access and MS Excel. The findings revealed that abused children were described as those children who came to school hungry, dirty, with no enough clothing, had sustained truancy, sustained failure to complete or do homework and aggressiveness. The findings further revealed that the scope of child abuse include the physical abuse, verbal abuse, child neglect and orphan hood. It was also revealed that implications of child abuse included difficulties in learning and poor academic performance and that abused pupils scored low on cognitive measures and demonstrate lower academic achievements. Further, the study revealed that the abused pupils do not freely interact well with other children hence there is need for intervention. Hence, the study concluded that child abuse does exist and that it has adverse impact on cognitive learning for pupils.

**Keywords:** Academic Performance, Child, Child Abuse, Maltreatment, Exploitation, Harm and Implication.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Child abuse has been defined by the African network for the prevention and protection against child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCA) as the intentional and unintentional acts which endanger the physical, health, emotional, moral and the educational welfare of the child. Child abuse as any act of mistreatment or subjection that endangers a child's physical, emotional and health development. Child abuse include not only physical assault but also malnourishment, abandonment, neglect, emotional abuse and sexual abuse (Leah, 2007). Child abuse and neglect are rapidly becoming universal phenomena in the current world societies despite the fact the child's rights are being recognized and even to some extent, protected by legislations and constitutions in many countries of the world. childhood abuse potentially has major economic

implications for many schools globally and for their students. even conservative estimates suggest that at least 8 percent of U.S. children experience sexual abuse before age 18, while 17 percent experience physical abuse and 18 percent experience physical neglect. Childhood maltreatment, and aversive parenting practices, in general, has the potential to delay the academic. It therefore has the potential to undermine school's ability to satisfy standards of school progress entailed in the No Child abuse Left behind legislation (U.S. Department of Education, 2005), putting them at risk for loss of federal funding. It also has the potential to adversely affect student's economic outcomes in adulthood, via its impact on achievement in middle and high school (Herbert, 2009).

According to Maher, (2006), prominent form of child abuse in Zambia are child battering, child labor, child abandonment, neglect, teenage prostitution, early marriage and forced marriage. Emotional and sexual abuses are highly noticeable in Zambia. Unwanted pregnancy has been identified to be a major cause of child abuse in Zambia. Many abused children were unwanted in the first place and turned out to be a severe burden on their emotionally immature or impoverished parents. Children from poor homes are more vulnerable to abuse. Zambia, which is a known corrupt nation in Africa is heading towards a dangerous poverty where her teeming population does not have enough food for healthy living. Equally lamented when analyzing the situation of children which are being used for house helps. child labor is the major obstacles to the achievement of education of education for all(EFA) and this result into a setback on the achievement of the world target of universal primary education. According to UNICEF, (2013), child abuse is an evidence of poverty. Equally recorded that some children reported that they were pushed into street hawking for maintenance needs of the family. That means that they are the breadwinners of their various families at their early age. It is common sight in major parks and streets in Zambia to see children of school age between 6 to 16 years as bus or taxi mates, hawking wares, pushing trucks for money or begging for money when they are supposed to be in the classroom learning in the schools. all these point to the fact that the worst hit groups are children who are at the risk of diseases, exploitation, neglect and violence.

Moreover, although, the potential impact of child abuse is large, but evidence of causal effects of maltreatment on children longer term outcomes in school is generally lacking. The current state of evidence for link between childhood maltreatment and school performance is limited to negative associations between maltreatment and school performance. On average, children who are abused receive lower rating of performance from their school teachers, score lower on cognitive assessments and standardized tests of academic achievement, obtain lower grades, and get suspended from school and retained in grade more frequently (UN, 2006). Abuse children are also prone to difficult in forming relationships with peers and adults in adapting to norms of social behavior. Although, these examples of negative associations between child abuse and school performance are suggestive of causal effects, they could be spuriously driven by unmeasured factors in families or neighborhoods that are themselves correlated with worse academic outcomes among children (Wolfe, 2012). In addition, not much of the previous evidence linking childhood maltreatment to worse school performance generalizes well to older children in middle and high school and to children not already identified as needing services. Evidence of impacts of maltreatment on academic performance in general population of middle and high school students is needed to establish evidence of effects on schooling attainment in the general education population and on economic outcomes in adulthood.

### 1.1. Statement of the Problem

The problem of child abuse has long been existing in Zambia, and have become more even devastating to the society has whole. The history of child abuse in Lusaka district is as old as the persistence of the phenomenon of Zambia itself which cannot be overemphasized. According to Korbin (2005), children suffer all forms of abuse ranging from child battering, child labor, child abandonment, neglect, teenage prostitution, early marriage and forced marriage. In most cases, the parents are even at the center of the root cause of all these social maltreatments. The school though, as an agent of socialization portends to have a strong and overwhelming influence on the development of the child, but observation has shown that these essence of education could probably be defeated if the children are made to continually suffer the pains of child labor (Jones, 2012). Child abuse is still a very real and pervasive part of life in rural and urban schools and communities of Zambia. Studies show that the highest number of children in Zambia who fail in school examination are victims of child abuse and many end up losing interest on school. The government of Zambia reacted towards child abuse by implementing measures such as hard punishment to those found guilty of child abuse, this was done in order to create a conducive environment for all. However, studies show that despite the government's efforts to end the occurrence of child abuse the cases of child abuse keeps on increasing rapidly.

Therefore, it was necessary for the study to be conducted on the impact of child abuse on learner's academic performance in selected primary schools.

### **1.2. The Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to assess the impact of child abuse on learner's academic performance at the selected primary schools in Lusaka district, Zambia.

### **1.3. Research Objectives**

The objectives of the study were to:

- Assess the meaning and scope of child abuse at the selected primary schools in Lusaka district.
- Determine the impact of child abuse on the learner's academic performance at the selected primary schools in Lusaka district.
- Examine the association of abused children with non-abused children at the selected primary schools in Lusaka district.

### **1.4. Significance of the Study**

This study is significant as the findings would be beneficial to parents, guardians, teachers, school heads and all other stakeholders in the educational sector, as they will be better enlightened on the problems associated with child abuse. Such knowledge may curtail any further action of exploiting the children especially been used as object of raising family economy.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Meaning and Scope of Child Abuse**

Child abuse refers to any behavior by parents, caregivers, other adults or older adolescents that is outside the norms of conduct and entails a substantial risk of causing physical or emotional harm to a child or young person (Brown, 2006). Such behaviors may be intentional or unintentional and can include acts of omission neglect and commission abuse. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines child abuse and child maltreatment as "all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power. "The WHO also says, "Violence against children includes all forms of violence against people under 18 years old, whether perpetrated by parents or other caregivers, peers, romantic partners, or strangers. "In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) uses the term child maltreatment to refer to both acts of commission (abuse), which include "words or overt actions that cause harm, potential harm, or threat of harm to a child", and acts of omission (neglect), meaning "the failure to provide for a child's basic physical, emotional, or educational needs or to protect a child from harm or potential harm". The United States federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act defines child abuse and neglect as, at minimum, "any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation" or "an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm.

The five main subtypes of child abuse and neglect are physical abuse, emotional maltreatment, neglect, sexual abuse, and witnessing family violence (Leah 2007). Kay (2003) asserts that physical abuse happens when an adult deliberately inflicts injuries on a child or deliberately fails to prevent the child from coming to physical harm. Forms of physical harms include shaking the child violently, throwing an object to the child with an intention to stabbing him/her, hitting, punching or slapping, scolding, kicking, burning, suffocating or smothering the child and intentionally poisoning the child. Physical abuse in most cases is rampant involving caregivers who easily lose their tempers with children who are carefree and heed not to mild punishment.

On the other hand, verbal abuse is one form of emotional abuse. It involves severe and sustained ill treatment which gradually harms the child's emotional as well as psychological development. Verbal assault, instilling an atmosphere of fear and shame, frightening amongst others can cause emotional abuse to a child. Even to non-abused children, unfair criticism or ridicule and rejection can be painful and demoralizing for a period of time. Defined emotional abuse as criticism, humiliation, denigration, insults, putdowns, name-calling and other attempts to undermine self-image and sense of worth (Herbert, 2009). Neglect involves failure to provide a child with basic needs like food, good levels of hygiene and health, clothing, shelter and medical attention when the child falls ill. Accordingly, the indicators of neglect include poor academic

performance in schools, poor inadequate clothing, untreated medical condition, poor self-esteem, chronic tiredness and hunger, day-dreaming in class, poor health conditions, lateness to school, truancy, poor social relations, and indiscriminate attention seeking with adult and high levels of accidents. Going by this information, it appears that child neglect is not a secret and stakeholders in education sector are concerned about the all round elimination of child abuse that should be addressed at school level by the teachers. The neglected learners have been found to be inattentive and have low concentration span on cognitive tasks (Wolfe, 2013).

Child sexual abuse is an especially complicated form of abuse because of its layers of guilt and shame. It's important to recognize that sexual abuse doesn't always involve body contact. Exposing a child to sexual situations or material is sexually abusive, whether or not touching is involved. Sexually abused children are often tormented by shame and guilt. They may feel that they are responsible for the abuse or somehow brought it upon themselves. This can lead to self-loathing and sexual and relationship problems as they grow older. The shame of sexual abuse makes it very difficult for children to come forward. They may worry that others won't believe them, will be angry with them, or that it will split their family apart. Because of these difficulties, false accusations of sexual abuse are not common, so if a child confides in you, take them seriously (Kirk, 2003).

## **2.2. Causes of Child Abuse**

According to the child welfare league of America, children whose parents abuse drugs and alcohol are almost three times more likely to be abused and four times more likely to be neglected than children of parents who are not substance abusers. Eighty-five percent of states that report statistics for child abuse and neglect cite parental substance abuse and poverty as the top two issues related to child abuse and neglect. Additionally, studies have shown that the most consistent finding in substantiated child abuse cases is that the abusive parents often report having been physically, sexually, or emotionally abused or neglected as children (Brown, 2006). Therefore, child abuse can occur in several circumstances such as domestic violence. Children who are part of households where there is frequent domestic violence are prone to becoming victims of child abuse themselves. Men who abuse their female partners are responsible for abusing the children in their homes too. Alcohol and drug abuse are also causes of child abuse. Parents who have a history of alcohol and drug abuse can be responsible for child abuse. Dependence on substance abuse is one of the major causes of child abuse and maltreatment which includes physical abuse and intentional neglect. Alcohol or drug abusing parent is more likely to initiate child abuse with kids of five years or below (UNICEF, 2013).

Furthermore, untreated mental illness is also the cause of child abuse. A parent's untreated mental illness is a common cause of child abuse. Manic depression or any other illness of the mind can become a prime cause for parents to be unavailable for the child. A mother may remain withdrawn from her kids or in extreme cases suspect that the child is plotting against her. A parent suffering is often the cause of subjecting a child to abuse. Nevertheless, stress and lack of support is also the cause of child abuse. Many children face psychological mistreatment when their caregivers or parents are under stress. Parents find it difficult to deal with the emotional needs of a child especially when they face stressful situations. Divorces, relationship issues, financial worries and job related problems can lead to parents meting out abuse to their children. Moreover, lack of parenting is also a cause of child abuse. Most parents are naturally gifted while caring for their children, but few may not be able to manage their physical and emotional needs adequately. Many parents would often equate disciplining children with abusing them and will need counselling to understand the role of a parent in a better manner. Some research work has shown that younger children are particularly vulnerable to certain types of abuse, such as shaken baby syndrome and battered child syndrome. Shaken baby syndrome is a severe form of head injury that occurs when a baby is shaken hard enough to cause the baby's brain to bounce against its skull. This causes bruising, swelling, and bleeding in the brain that can lead to permanent, severe brain damage or death. Even with immediate medical treatment, the prognosis for a victim of this syndrome is very poor. Most babies will be left with significant damage to their brain that can cause mental retardation or cerebral palsy. One of the difficulties in identifying this type of abuse is that there are usually no outward physical signs of trauma, which often creates a delay in the child receiving treatment (Korbin, 2005).

## **2.3. Impact of Child Abuse**

All forms of abuse and neglect have a harmful impact on children and young people. Emotional scars, children who suffer abuse or neglect feel most of the pain on the inside. Many children suffer low self-esteem and feelings of guilt, often blaming themselves for the abuse. Children can find it difficult to have trusting relationships and experience loneliness and bullying. Children often have feelings of hopelessness, hate, despair, misery, and rage, sometimes talking about feeling suicidal or self-harm. Physical scars, children can have direct physical effects such as bruising, cuts, broken bones, health

problems, under-nourishment or even, death (Leah, 2007). However, impact on future wellbeing, children who have suffered abuse are more likely to have lower educational attainment and suffer from drug and alcohol dependency. Long-term physical and mental health difficulties including depression can be a consequence. Research shows that many individuals who commit serious offences suffered from abuse during their childhood.

Furthermore, child abuse often leave long term scars on the child, one that are difficult to erase from the mind and the body too (UN, 1991). It can have a massive impact on the way the child will manage relationships during adulthood and can dent their self-confidence. Additionally, abused children are unable to function normally at school, college or work when they grow up due to feeling being worthless. It can be argued that abused children have extreme difficulties to overcome negative feelings one is constantly being belated or even beaten up. Abused children harbor feelings of inferiority and being worthless and thus settle for lesser education and low paying jobs when they grow up. Similarly, sexually abused children cannot ignore the shameful stigma attached to it (UNICEF, 2013). Moreover, child abuse has made many children to have trust issues in the sense that it is very difficult for children to trust other people, especially when their parents have been responsible for abuse. For instance, an abused child may not be able to form a strong relationship nor maintain a healthy relationship. Furthermore, abused children are unable to vent their feelings and emotions positively and this results in bottling up of emotions and may give way to different psychological problems. In the same vain, abused children often resort to alcohol or drugs during adulthood to assuage the pain as they can suffer from anxiety and depression (Jones, 2012).

Jaffe (2009), asserts that child abuse has the psychological, physical and behavioral impact on the children and this can cost the society as a whole. In some cases, the physical impacts of child abuse can be minor bruises or they can be severe broken bones, internal bleeding. As well as causing physical pain and injuries, the lingering emotional impacts of physical abuse also causes damage. Brain development, child abuse and neglect can impact on a child's brain development and their cognitive abilities, particularly in the areas of self-regulation, speech and language. Research shows that children who have experienced abuse struggle more at school and have reported difficulty paying attention and delayed speech and language development. Additionally, child abuse causes impaired cognitive abilities which can create a sustained state of sustained fear and anxiety for the child which causes distress (UNICEF, 2013). Moreover, psychological impacts, child abuse and neglect can have life-long consequences for a child's mental health. Problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety and mood disorders (depression) are all too common among adolescents who suffered abuse as children; the research shows a strong link between childhood abuse and depression later in life. Social difficulties, Children who experience abuse and neglect are more likely to form insecure attachments with people and can impact on a child's ability to trust and communicate with others and form healthy relationships throughout their life. Behavioral impacts, child abuse and neglect can lead to behavioral issues in childhood and throughout adolescence. Studies show young people who have experienced abuse have a tendency towards internalizing behaviors such as being sad and withdrawn or externalizing behaviors such as being aggressive or hyperactive in childhood. These behaviors are more likely to occur if the abuse is sustained and occurs at more than one developmental stage (Herbert, 2009).

Furthermore, the impact on future wellbeing, children who have suffered abuse are more likely to have lower educational attainment and suffer from drug and alcohol dependency. Long-term physical and mental health difficulties including depression can be a consequence. Many individuals who commit serious offences suffered from abuse during their childhood. Child abuse is shocking due to the marks it leaves, not all signs of child abuse are as obvious. Ignoring children's needs, putting them in unsupervised, dangerous situations, exposing them to sexual situations, or making them feel worthless or stupid are also forms of child abuse and neglect and they can leave deep, lasting scars on kids. Regardless of the type of abuse, the result is serious emotional harm. But there is help available (Jones, 2012).

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Study Design

The study adopted a mixed methods approach which is a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. Exploratory and descriptive designs were as well considered appropriate as they also allowed for more flexible strategies of data collection in order to answer the research questions. It was aimed at collecting information from respondents on the impact of child abuse on learner's academic performance at the selected primary schools in Lusaka district, Zambia.

#### 3.2. Research Site

The research was conducted in Lusaka district of Zambia at some selected secondary schools from which respondents were also sampled.



**3.3. Population, Sample and Sampling Procedure**

The population for the study comprised of head teachers, teachers, parents and pupils from the targeted area. The target population was 700. The sample size involved a total of 70 respondents which included three (3) head teachers, one from each selected school. Twelve (12) teachers, five from each selected school. Ten (10) parents and Forty-five (45) pupils, Fifteen (15) from each selected school. The study employed both purposive and simple random sampling on different participants from the selected secondary schools. Simple random sampling was used on the pupils and teachers whereas purposive sampling was used on the head teachers.

**3.4. Data Analysis**

In this research, data was analyzed qualitatively as the semi structured interview schedules were used as data collection instruments. Thematic approach was used, where data analysis started with the categorization of themes from the semi structured interview schedules. The data gathered was analyzed according to the themes of the study and the order of the research objectives. Data generated from the questionnaires was analyzed manually and also with a combination of software MS Access, SPSS and MS Excel.

**3.5. Ethical Issues**

The researchers avoided pressuring respondents to take part in the research. Alternatively, permission consents, assents were obtained from respondents involved in the research and the research topic was strategically selected to ensure that there was no harm whatsoever to the research respondents. In this research, the researcher was fully conscious of the need to abide by the ethical rule of respecting the privacy of individuals taking part in the research. In the same way, all the respondents were to remain unidentified to the public as all their valuable views, opinions and perceptions were only known by the researchers for use only in the research and participant’s identities will forever remain hidden. Additionally, the researchers got permission from Lusaka DEBS office, the council chairperson as well as from the head teachers on behalf of the independent schools.

**4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The following findings and discussions were presented according to set research objectives:

**4.1. Meaning and Scope of Child Abuse**

(35%) of Teachers stated that child abuse Child abuse is harming a child as a result of human action or inaction that is proscribed, proximate and preventable. (15%) of head teachers also stated that child abuse is the harsh or ill treatment meted on any child, it could be by physical or emotional means. (10%) of parents said that, cruel behavior on children by teachers, parents, peers, guardians, siblings and the society in general constitute child abuse. (40%) of pupils also stated that 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.

**Table 1: Meaning and Scope of Child Abuse**

PARTICIPANTS	RESPONSES
(35%) of teachers	Child abuse Child abuse is harming a child as a result of human action or inaction that is proscribed, proximate and preventable
(15%) of head teachers	Child abuse is the harsh or ill treatment meted on any child, it could be by physical or emotional means.
(10%) of parents	Cruel behavior on children by teachers, parents, peers, guardians, siblings and the society in general constitute child abuse.
(40%) of pupils	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.

**4.2. Impact of Child Abuse on Learner’s Academic Performance**

(40%) of teachers stated that, pupils after being abused, it became difficult for them to do school work or to make contributions in group discussions and taking the initiative during the learning process in class. (35%) of head teachers reported that the abused children developed abnormal behavior and failed to participate freely and actively in class. (12%) of parents reported of the learners scored low in their tests, classwork and in examinations due to abuse. (13%) of pupils stated that, the experiences of abused learners have led to loss of concentration in class and many of the abused learners lag behind in their school work.

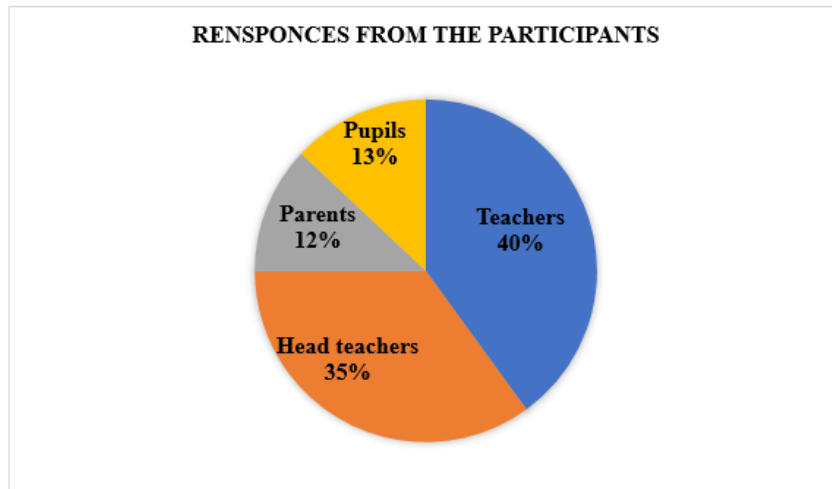


Chart 1: Impact of Child Abuse on Learner’s Academic Performance

4.3. Association of Abused Children with Non-Abused Children

(45%) of pupils stated that abused children develop complications such as withdrawal, aggression, inflicting harm on themselves and others and behaving in anti-social manner. (30%) of teachers reported that survivors of child abuse and neglect avoid the relationship with their peers because the feelings of closeness increase their feelings of vulnerability and lack of self-control. (15%) of head teachers stated that abused children’s social behaviors range from withdrawal to extreme aggression. (10%) of parents reported that abused children develop contact problems with themselves, so they fight, have tempers, become irresponsible, non-cooperative with peers and dominant among others.

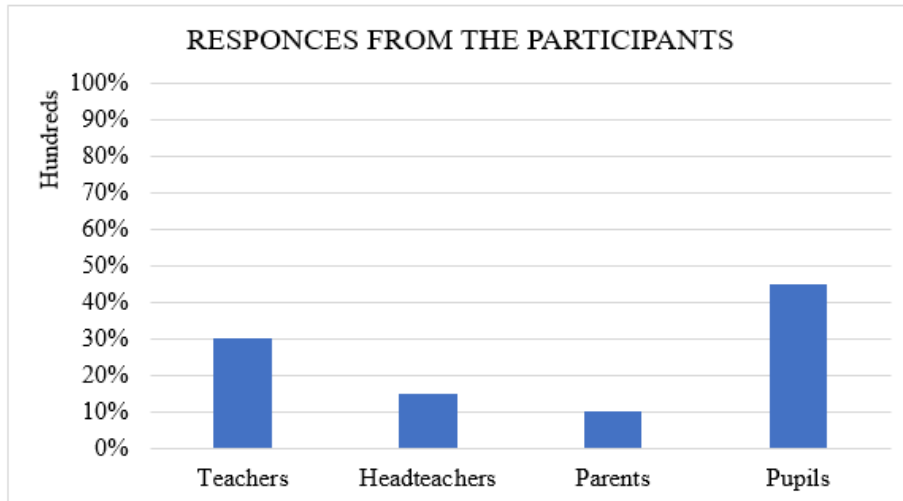


Figure 1: Association of Abused Children with Non-Abused Children

5. CONCLUSION

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 classroom discussions or other classroom related activities. Thus, they find themselves having to repeat grades. It was also concluded that the abused learners paid more attention to their painful experiences and fail to concentrate to their school work and this affected their full participation in class. Additionally, the study found that some abused children 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 behavior such as bullying other learners and has hatred to people surrounding him/her and that these learners are often discipline problem children. Lastly but not the least, the study found that the abused children prefer solitary environments hence, academic achievement declines due to low concentration and divided attention.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are actions that should be taken on the basis of the findings of this study:

- The Ministry of Education and Training should ensure that teachers are equipped with counselling skills to be able to identify any child under abuse in their classrooms.
- The school administrators should make sure that abused learners are provided with extra remedial classes to assist them catch up academically.
- Teachers should pay special attention to identify forms of abuse and support abused learners and report such cases to relevant authorities.
- The school administrators should ensure that abused learners are referred to health institutions for medical assistance.
- NGO's should organize awareness programs, workshops and seminars with a view to educating all concerned with child upbringing and child education.

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