



Academic Impact on Sexually Abused Learners in Dodoma City Public Secondary Schools in Tanzania

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Abstract: *This study examined how students performed academically after experiencing sexual abuse. The study used a phenomenological research design and a qualitative approach. The target audience consisted of students who are sexually abused, academic instructors, school counsellors, ward education officers, statistical and logistical officers, police officers, and social workers. All provided information that was gathered. The professional participants were chosen using the purposive sampling approach. Semi-structured interviews, observation, and document analysis were conducted from all participants to gather data. The results indicated that the majority of the abused learners underperformed as a result of sexual abuse and developed a fear of everyone around them, which disturbed their academic performance. Some developed an antisocial personality and a misguided annoyed attitude. The study concludes that students in public secondary schools who have experienced child sexual abuse do worse academically. According to the study's findings, parents, school administrators, and teachers should collaborate when treating abused students to assist them in overcoming their difficulties and enhancing their social and academic performance. In addition, the education stakeholders and relevant ministries (Police, Child and Social Welfare, and the Ministry of Education and Training) should assist in decreasing child abuse from the grassroots level.*

Keywords: *Child, Sexual abuse, Learners, Academic achievement, and public secondary school.*

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1. Introduction

Despite Tanzania's efforts to stop child sexual abuse, there is often not enough understanding of the prevention and available options. In Tanzania, incidents of sexual abuse in a school setting are on the rise (Goessmann, Ssenyonga, Nkuba, Hermenau, and Hecker, 2020). Instead of serving as a hub of assistance, schools and homes are recently becoming hotspots for various forms of abuse. According to the United Nations, obtaining an education is a fundamental human right and a means of promoting social equality and greater economic growth (UNICEF, 2008). Despite the critical role that education

plays, many children do not fully engage in the education that the school system provides due to some issues, such as child labor, children taking on family responsibilities, poverty, and child maltreatment (UNICEF, 2008).

The worst part, though, is that children are defenseless and are a particularly vulnerable segment of society. People in society do not want to think that child abuse occurs in their neighborhood, but it does. Children are sexually abused by themselves and by adults whose moral standards are undesirable, and this abusive behavior has an impact on students' academic achievement. One wonders how such abuse affects children's behavior by asking questions like: What

trauma are children experiencing? How are kids handling their schoolwork? These inquiries sparked the motivation needed to carry out the study to address this issue.

Around the world, child sexual abuse happens in a variety of situations and environments. According to estimates from Fulu (2015), 73 million boys and 150 million girls under the age of 18 have engaged in forced sex and experienced other types of sexual abuse involving physical contact. Globally, the prevalence of child sexual abuse ranges from 2 to 62% for girls, whereas for boys, it ranges from 3 to 16%. In the world as of 2014, at least 120 million girls under the age of 20 had been forced to have sex or perform other sexual acts, or one in ten, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2014). The highest prevalence rate was observed in Africa (34.4%), according to a meta-analysis conducted in 2009. It was estimated that 7.9% of males and 19.7% of females worldwide experienced sexual abuse before the age of 18 years.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, it appears that the prevalence is high. 25% of males and 29% of girls in Southern African nations reported having forced sex. According to research conducted in Ethiopia on high school boys, 68.2% of them had experienced sexual abuse at some point in their lives. In Kenya, 58 out of every 100 children had experienced sexual abuse, while 29% of boys and 24% of girls reported being coerced into having unwelcome sex (Hajizadeh and Nghiem, 2020). Abuse is frequently perpetrated in the household. Up to 1 billion children between the ages of 2 and 17 are thought to have undergone sexual abuse globally in the recent past. According to estimates from WHO (2020), between 8 and 31% of girls and 3 to 17% of boys are victims of sexual abuse.

In Tanzania, according to statistics, there were 422 CSA instances in 2014 and 2,358 cases in 2015. There has been a significant increase in reported incidences of sexual abuse, and the government needs to act. From January to June 2016, 1,765 instances of sexual abuse were documented. The number of cases increased to 6,376 in 2018 from the 4,728 recorded in 2017 (Mkonyi, Mwakawanga, Rosser, Bonilla, Lukumay, Mohammed, and Wadley, 2021). In addition to the previously mentioned statistics, sodomy cases have increased, going from 12 in the first half of 2017 to 533 in the same period next year (Mkonyi et al., 2021). The unfortunate thing is that CSA cases are linked to mental health issues, multiple sexual partners, sleeping issues, and truancy from school or dropouts (Brown and Cole, 2015).

The rate of CSA is significant and it affects school-age children, as can be seen from the background information above. Hence, these sexually abused children are

students in primary and secondary schools. Despite the severity of CSA, the actions made by family members and education stakeholders are still insufficient; even the continuous assessment results and follow-up on the student's academic performance are not well documented at school. This is a worrying indication that society is not paying attention to this serious issue and this draws my attention to doing this study to help sexually abused students deal with their academics and enhance their achievement in schooling, a possible remedy must be found immediately. The government should improve guidance and counseling services in schools, increase awareness among learners concerning CSA, and ensure the availability of counseling services. However, there is a need to enforce by-laws and existing laws against perpetrators.

1.1 Problem statement

Children's sexual abuse is a global crisis that requires speedy attention. A child may be subjected to sexual abuse at home, at school, at the church, mosque, or in the community. In most cases, perpetrators are someone familiar to a child. The worst thing is that it is entirely avoidable, yet leaves everlasting scars (Ferrajao and Elklit, 2021). The United Nations views education as a basic human right and an instrument for achieving social equality and higher economic development (UNICEF, 2008). The statistical data show a great increase in CSA as stated by Mkonyi et al., 2021. Studies in Tanzania have demonstrated the high prevalence of child sexual abuse. The findings from a national survey reported nearly 1 in 3 females and approximately 1 in 7 males have experienced sexual violence before the age of 18.5 The most commonly reported type of childhood sexual abuse was unwanted touching (16% and 8.7% of females and males, respectively) followed by attempted unwanted intercourse (14.6% and 6.3% of females and males, respectively) and almost 6.9% of girls and 2.9% of boys were physically forced into sexual intercourse before the age of 18. According to Furia, Shoo, Ruggojo, Kilonzo, Basu and Kisanga, (2019) reported 26% of boys and 19% of girls aged 13-25 years were forced to look at pornographic movies, while 9.8% of boys and 8.7% of girls experienced forced sexual intercourse. Tanzania's government have made efforts to end child sexual abuse, by introducing campaigns to educate people about the effects and risk of CSA and introducing the women and children desk at police stations, but awareness of the prevention and strategies are not adequate.

Despite the identified efforts, there is still a gap in Tanzania on how these sexually abused children cope with their studies as nobody cares about what is happening to them. But again, there is missing data on CSA from 2020 to date. Therefore, this study aims to fill

this gap by assessing the effect of child sexual abuse on their academic performance.

The objective of this study was therefore to find out learner's academic achievement after being sexually abused.

2. Literature Reviews

The empirical and theoretical reviews are presented in this section below.

2.1 Empirical Review:

The nature, severity, and duration of the abuse, as well as the coping mechanisms and reactions from family, friends, communities, and professionals, all have an impact on the health and well-being of children and young people. Academic performance is ruined as a result of the psychological effects of sexual abuse on students. As a result of the stigma and discrimination associated with the taboo topic of child sexual abuse, victims of this type of abuse frequently experience anxiety, depression, psychological trauma, and self-harm. These effects can temporarily and permanently impair academic performance due to poor concentration (Kiss, Quinlan-Davidson, Pasquero, Tejero Hogg, Theis and Hossain, 2020). However, the effects of childhood sexual abuse can be long-lasting and can result in issues with intimacy as well as socioeconomic consequences like homelessness and unemployment.

The effects of child abuse on the academic achievement and personality development of young adult students in Pakistan were evaluated by Niazi, Igbal, and Aslam in 2022. The semi-structured interview was utilized in this study's descriptive and phenomenological research design to examine how abused children function at school, and the qualitative approach was used to learn more in-depth information about the issue. The study concluded that child abuse had a significant impact on students' academic achievement. Many of the pupils were unaware that they were being abused due to ignorance, even though they experienced numerous forms of child abuse.

(physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect). It was discovered that child abuse had a substantial impact on personal development since it made the harmed learner more stressed. Students who have experienced child sexual abuse behave differently and negatively than their non-abusive peers. Learning problems are negatively impacted by child sexual abuse, with abused children performing worse than non-abused children and having learning disorders. Children who are ignored by their parents are more likely to suffer maltreatment.

Awopetu, Hyambe, and Chia (2020) conducted a study to determine the impact of child abuse on secondary school students' academic performance in Ondo State, Nigeria. The results of this study showed that secondary school student's academic performance was considerably influenced negatively by child sexual abuse. This suggests that student academic achievement is impacted by child sexual abuse. The findings of this study are not unexpected given that abused children frequently isolate themselves, which can result in sadness and a lack of focus in the classroom and eventually poor academic performance.

Another scholar (Alokan, 2019) used the same methods as Awopetu et al., (2020) and found a strong correlation between student achievement and child sexual abuse. On a range of academic and socioemotional metrics, sexually abused children continue to perform worse than their non-sexually abused peers. Additionally, they exhibit greater externalizing and internalizing behavioral issues and different academic risk manifestations (Devine and Ojeda, 2017). Research on students who had experienced sexual assault in secondary schools focused mostly on academic achievement. Many studies focused on negative factors such as post-traumatic stress disorder, and alcohol use (Goldstein, Flett, and Wekerle, 2010). A multitude of studies focused on resilience and protective factors, yet few studies focus directly on school performance (Versteeg and Kappe, 2021).

Child sexual abuse is associated with intellectual deficits and academic performance such as delay in acquiring language and problems in mathematics and reading tests. Difficulties with academic performance and behavior experienced by sexually abused children may impact negatively on future educational attempts and eventually hamper the development of necessary life skills including self-discipline and the ability to sustain effective work roles (Ferrara and Staffoli, 2015). Sexual abuse has a profound effect on a child's ability to develop skills and abilities, the abuse influences every aspect of the child's growth and development thus, the development of concentration problems at school, and anxiety regarding school attendance. Fluctuations in school performance led to low self-esteem and negative self-image which increase fear, self-blame, and feelings of guilt (De Boer, De Witt, and Aiking, 2016).

According to Hagger, Luszczynska, De Wit, Benyamini, Burkert, Chamberland, and Gollwitzer, (2016), school-related experiences and academic performance of sexually abused children and adolescents offered recommendations to the teachers of learners who are or have been sexually abused to be close to them for quick healing. The conclusion was reached that CSA does have an impact on the academic performance of learners. Therefore, teachers need a greater understanding and

awareness of CSA, to help these learners. The above research indicates that there is limited information on child sexual abuse especially in Dodoma region Tanzania.

2.2 Theoretical review

The study employed social learning theory (Bandura 1977). According to SLT the idea that humans learn from observing and imitating the behavior modeled by others. So, the theory is connected to the study because children observe and imitate the behavior of their models and grow to become like them. Most sexually abused children become sexual abusers later (Capella, Gutierrez, Rodriguez, and Gomez, 2018). The theory emphasizes the importance of observing, modeling, and imitating the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. Social learning theory considers how both environmental and cognitive factors interact to influence human learning and behavior. Therefore, a healthy and safe learning environment without sexual abuse is crucial for learners to learn in harmony.

3. Methodology

The qualitative research approach with a narrative study design was employed. Qualitative research in particular deals with gathering and interpreting non-numerical data to understand the human and social environment (Levitt, Bamberg, Creswell, Frost, Josselson, and Suarez-Orozco, 2018).

3.1. Data sources and methods of data collection

Non-probability approach with purposive sampling was used for professional participants. Purposive sampling was used to identify information-rich cases related to the phenomenon (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, and Hogwood, 2015). While sexually abused learners voluntarily participated in this research. Volunteer sampling is often used to select individuals for in-depth interviews (Moore, Faulkner, Rhodes, Brussoni, Chulak-Bozzer, Ferguson, and Tremblay, 2020). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observation, and document review and analysis.

3.2. Data analysis

According to Braun and Clarke, 2021 thematic analysis is an accessible, flexible, and increasingly popular method in qualitative data analysis. Data was thematically analyzed in this study.

3.3. Ethical consideration

Ethical consideration is a set of principles that guide research practices (Masanja, 2020). The letter that introduced the researcher officially to DEO's office, WEO's office, the social worker's office, and the respective schools involved in this study was collected from the Faculty of Humanities and Education (FAHE) of St John's University. Also, the researcher collected ethical approval from the university committee.

4. Results and Discussion

The majority of respondents mentioned depression, trauma, low self-esteem, unhappiness, social isolation, and decline in grades and academic achievements during the interview.

4.1. Depression and Trauma

According to the study's conclusions, child sexual abuse frequently results in feelings of helplessness, remorse, shame, low self-esteem, and a distorted self-image (Ssewanyana, Beyongyera, and Rechael (2022). These unfavorable feelings may eventually lead to depression, which can impair learning in the classroom. Additionally, Pichon, Treves-Kagan, Stern, Kyegombe, Stöckl, and Buller (2020), noted that students who have been subjected to abuse may exhibit long-lasting sadness, a loss of interest in once-enjoyed pursuits, a sense of worthlessness, and a lack of hope for the future. These were reported by a sexually abused learner in an interview, and one stated the following:

I was interested in discussion and group activities but after the sexual abuse, I feel so down that am no longer interested in interacting with other students (Sexually abused learner, 17th April 2023).

Riggs, (2021) noted that CSA-related sadness and trauma can also impair communication abilities, making it challenging for students who have experienced sexual abuse to express themselves or take an active part in class discussions. They could have trouble speaking, coming up with the correct words, or interacting with others. According to Ucuz, Ari, Ozcan, Topaktas, Sarraf and Dogan, (2022), child sexual abuse is a painful experience that can have long-lasting psychological impacts. There may be many signs of the trauma, such as unsettling memories, flashbacks, and nightmares. Learners who have experienced sexual abuse may also experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms like sensitive anxiety, emotional anguish, and aversion to reminders of the incident. Learners who have encountered CSA may find it difficult to reply to questions in class or on exams, according to McCoy,

Sonnen, Mii, Huit, Meidlinger, Coffey and Hansen, (2022). The trauma they have experienced can make it difficult for them to remember details or express themselves clearly. One client in an interview conquered with the above literature by saying:

My step-grandfather walked into my room when I was about to wake up, he forced me out of my bed and into the shower where he sexually abused me, he continued to do this to me for months. This man took my childhood days, my self-esteem, my trust and my life. I was turned into this boy who lived in fear daily and carried the shame of who I was. (Sexually abused learner, 17th April 2023).

From the above findings, it's obvious that sexually abused learners cannot concentrate on their studies and keep on thinking of what has happened to them. This implies that child sexual abuse affects learners' learning progress.

4.2. Low self-esteem and unhappiness

The results of the study also showed that a learner's self-esteem and sense of value can be seriously harmed by child sexual abuse. Students' motivation, confidence, and belief in their skills can all be badly impacted by this poor self-esteem (Edinoh, Ogunronbi and Fulus, (2023). They might form a bad opinion of themselves, which might show up as a lack of confidence in academic situations. As a result, they could have self-doubt, be reluctant to participate in class activities, or hesitate to ask for assistance from classmates or teachers. The researcher on observation session observed how sexually abused learners were struggling to participate in the class session and in addition to that, one participant in my interview agreed with this literature by saying:

My friends are complaining that I'm now used to and don't play with them. They also laugh at me about my performance in tests, group work, and examinations. I am afraid to tell them about what my brother-in-law does to me. (Sexually abused learner, 17th April 2023).

The whole sense of well-being and happiness of a person can be dramatically reduced by child sexual abuse. The trauma and its effects may result in a lingering dissatisfaction, a sense of emptiness, and a diminished ability to experience joy and pleasure. Students who have experienced sexual abuse may find it difficult to control their emotions and find happiness and fulfillment in their lives (Van der Kolk, 2022).

According to the research and the aforementioned remark, CSA might make it harder to comprehend and process information. Due to the emotional and

psychological effects of the abuse, students may find it difficult to focus, follow directions, or understand academic content, which can hurt their academic performance.

4.3. Social isolation

Sexually abused learners may withdraw from social interactions and isolate themselves as a coping mechanism. This isolation can result from feelings of shame, guilt, or fear, as well as a loss of trust in others:

Sexual abuse disturbed me seriously because I failed to concentrate in class and do my homework. The whole act is haunting me. The person who is supposed to help me with my homework is my abuser and I do not want to be close to him. I have developed a fear of all males; including my teachers and all my male classmates" (Sexually abused learner, 17th April,2023).

Social isolation can lead to a lack of support networks, reduced opportunities for positive relationships, and limited access to emotional and practical resources (Walker-Descartes, 2022). Without a strong support system, students may struggle to cope with the effects of abuse, making it difficult to focus on their studies and perform academically. The abused learner complained by saying:

I would leave home in the morning and hide along the way to school and then join others when they were 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. (Sexually abused learner, 17th April 2023).

From the quote above sexually abused learners do not only affect their mental health but it affects their physical being by getting sexually transmitted diseases. The effects of sexual abuse on students' academic performance are well understood, but nothing has been done about them, according to a class observation that was conducted on April 18, 2023. The findings showed that neglected students fall behind in their academic achievements. As a result, 4 out of 6 sexually abused students who were interviewed struggled to pay attention in class because of the abuse's lasting effects, including despair, trauma, social isolation, and low self-esteem. The findings show that these codes are general and non-specific when it comes to the subject of teachers sexually abusing kids. One participant had this to say:

Ever since I was abused, I lost concentration in class, I am not at ease. My heart melts with fear. I don't think of anything else other than what

has happened to me. As a result, I lose focus and I don't participate in class. I pay more attention to my worries. (Sexually abused learner, 18th April 2023).

4.4. The decline in grades and academic achievements

Another finding from the study was that CSA can obstruct creativity and the natural learning process. The ability of students to interact with the subject matter, think critically, and consider creative solutions may suffer if they lose interest or enthusiasm in their academic endeavors (Molstad, Weinhardt and Jones (2023). Then, the academic performance of students who have experienced sexual abuse may suffer, resulting in a

drop in their marks. The emotional and cognitive impacts of the abuse may affect their capacity for focus, study, and successful performance on tests and assignments. Below are a series of findings on the academic teacher report on affected students in this regard. We present a quote followed by some tabulated results in the following tables:

She was among the best-performing learners in their class and she always scored 60% and above in most of her subjects. However, after the incident of sexual abuse by her brother-in-law she lost interest in her studies and she could not concentrate anymore and started scoring below 40% in many subjects (Academic teacher, 19th April 2023).

Table 1: Decline in grades and academic achievements Student X results

Subject	Math's	Physics	Chemistry	Biology	Geography	History	Civics	Eng	Kisw
Before	54	58	59	63	66	53	67	68	72
After	34	27	29	33	36	34	38	40	38

Observation from continuous assessment report, 19th April 2023

Table 2: Decline in grades and academic achievements Student M results in 2020

Subject	Math's	Physics	Chemistry	Biology	Geography	History	Civics	Eng	Kisw
Before	45	38	43	58	62	48	60	64	67
After	25	17	21	32	29	22	30	34	35

Documentation from academic office, 19th April 2023

Table 3: Improved Grades and Academic Achievements Student M results in 2022

Subject	Math's	Physics	Chemistry	Biology	Geography	History	Civics	Eng	Kisw
2020	25	17	21	32	29	22	30	34	35
2022	41	51	53	67	69	59	68	76	78

Documentation of continuous assessment on, 19th April 2023

According to the results in Table 2, student M was sexually abused by her uncle and endured a very trying situation at school and home. The counseling teacher noticed changes and a decline in the learner's academic performance and decided to follow up. She understood the situation that student M was going through and found ways to help her by removing her from her current residence and finding a new home for her. Table 2 displays the findings from Form I in 2020 (when she was

the victim of sexual abuse), and Table 3 displays the results from Form III in 2022 (when she was safe, unharmed, and receiving counseling at home and school). This is a sign that students who have experienced sexual abuse need counseling to rehabilitate and advance in their academic pursuits. Additionally, these statistics from 2020 and 2022 show that secondary school students who have experienced sexual abuse have much lower academic achievement.

Table 4: Decline in grades and academic achievements of student N

Subject	Math	Physics	Chem	Bios	Geo	Hist	Civ	Eng	Kisw
Before	35	33	37	54	58	62	56	60	62
After	11	19	21	38	29	33	37	31	30

Documentation of continuous assessment on, 19th April 2023

The observed results from three different learners indicate that the combination of depression, trauma, unhappiness, social isolation and low self-esteem can have a cumulative effect on students' academic achievement. They may face difficulties concentrating, completing assignments, or engaging in classroom discussions. Additionally, one of the social workers identified that the effects of CSA can vary from individual to individual, and not all sexually abused learners will experience the same challenges. Similar findings were reported by Bostock, Plumpton and Pratt, (2017), who hypothesized that children exposed to violence are more likely to report stressful life events than non-exposed children, exhibit fewer pro-social emotions and increased personal problems, are unable to understand the dynamics of inter-parental violence, experience self-blame that results in feelings of guilt, worry, and anxiety that may affect academic performance and positive child interactions.

The above outcome was consistent with Harvey and Clark's (2016) research, which showed that students who encounter higher levels of violence have lower academic functioning skills in areas including reading, math, English, physics, and chemistry. Children who notice their presence within a hostile environment and lack healthy outlets of support are more likely to witness negative mood provocations with peers. In other words, peer victimization and provocation may lead to weapon use, injuries, and multiple abusers.

Finally, Harvey et al., (2016) offered measures that can minimize violence and improve the academic performance of students in public secondary schools in Tanzania. These measures include the creation of genuine institutions, strengthening access to justice, extending economic opportunities and employment, especially for young people, and fostering societal flexibility, both through institutions as well as by considering the sustainability of interventions, promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study demonstrated that the majority of sexually abused students perform below average as a result of their sexual abuse. The study made an effort to explain why a student did not do so well academically after experiencing sexual abuse in public secondary schools. According to the study, factors contributing to the fall in students' academic performance include social isolation, depression, trauma, low self-esteem, and low levels of happiness. It is advised that students who have experienced sexual abuse get counseling to accelerate their rehabilitation and aid in the healing process. The government should tighten the laws and by-laws against offenders and ensure that secondary public schools provide a safe atmosphere for students to learn. Nevertheless, teachers, counselors, social workers, police officers and the community at large should together with the ministries deal with the problem of CSA from the grassroots and help learners improve their academic achievements.

5.2 Recommendation for Further Studies

This study was specifically conducted in one secondary school because of the sensitivity of the study itself and the difficulty in getting the information.

1. However, further studies are needed to be conducted in more schools and find out the severity of child sexual abuse in learners' academic performance throughout the country so as to enable the creation of a better way to help the sexually abused learners in their academic and prevent CSA from happening by giving the learners ways of staying away from CSA.
2. The study should also focus later on identifying gaps in policy implementation and evaluating their impact on prevention and support systems.
3. Investigation on the effectiveness of training programs for teachers especially school counselors in recognizing and responding to child sexual abuse must be put into consideration.

By conducting further research in these areas, we can deepen our understanding of child sexual abuse in public secondary schools.

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