

# **CHILD ABUSE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EDUCATIONAL SECTOR IN NIGERIA**

**Mfonobong E. Umobong**

## **Abstract**

Child abuse has become a global problem that needs to be tackled if children are to be given the right to education and freedom. The issue of child abuse has been given serious attention in many parts of the world and Nigeria is not left out. Given this serious effort, one would have thought that this menace will not persist. However a look at the society shows that child abuse occurs not only at home but has found its way into the school system thus constituting a barrier to the attainment of sound educational development in the country. This paper discusses the prevalence of child abuse in the school and its impact on the educational development of the child. Based on the prevalence of abuses in the school, the author recommends that there should be public enlightenment programme and education to combat the mass ignorance on the acts that constitute abuse and to protect the Nigerian child against these abuses so as to benefit maximally from the education system.

## **Introduction**

A child is a person that has not attained the age of 18. For centuries, the Nigerian child has been seen as “an instrument or property with no absolute privilege of its own”. In the traditional African society the belief was that children should merely be seen and not heard. Children were not allowed to listen to adults’ discussions/conversation let alone make contributions. This situation was prevalent not only in the society but found its way into the educational system. Consequently, teachers only allowed children to make contributions when they deemed necessary.

Recently, there has been serious concern about the child with the realization that children play important part in the family and the society. It is generally agreed that children are the future generation, the leaders of tomorrow and the potential flag bearers of any nation. To carry out these duties, the child therefore has certain rights that must be protected and not be trampled upon or denied. In

recognition of the socio-cultural and educational dimension of the child, the United Nations, European Union, African Union, UNICEF and ANPPCAN have all joined efforts in advocating for protection of the right and well-being of children. Among other provisions, UNICEF and the National Policy on Children grant children the following rights:

- Protection against indecent and in human treatment like abuse and neglect
- Provision of a conducive environment to promote early stimulation to learning for the child
- Entitlement of every child (male/female) to receive compulsory basic education and equal opportunity for higher education
- Promotion and encouragement of child-friendly principles in all relevant institutions.

The above provisions recognize the importance of education for the optimum development of the child thus advocating for compulsory basic education and the provision of conducive learning environment. Education is therefore recognized as one avenue through which the child can develop properly. Many developing nations place a high premium on the education of their citizen because education is viewed as an instrument for cultural, social, political, economic and technological development and emancipation

In Nigeria, for instance, education is viewed as a means of building a free democratic, just and equalitarian society; a united strong and self-reliant nation; a land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). Thus, Nigeria and his people need a change and growth in education so as to be in line with the developed nations.

Every successive federal and state government administration has been allocating substantial portions of its annual budget to meet this broad objective. In some cases, regional and later state government had at one time or the other embarked on free education at all levels including higher institutions. Although these programmes have been brought to abrupt halt due to series of political changes and the present adverse economic conditions,

nevertheless, many state governments still endeavour to give financial aids to their students and educational institutions. State governments have come up with various policies as regards admission, administration, duration of programmes and so on. Presently, education has been made compulsory for children at the basic level and every child is encouraged to take the opportunity of acquiring at least basic education up to the junior secondary level by some state governments.

All these are efforts made to protect the basic right of children. The question is, are the children utilizing this opportunity maximally?

In the traditional African society, the training of the child was the sole responsibility of the parents and the members of the community who had the right to discipline and correct the child whenever they went wrong. The parents trained the child in a way that is suitable and acceptable to the standard of the society. Following the advent of western education and the introduction of nursery and pre-primary schools, parents tend to give over the responsibility of guiding, directing, counselling and role modeling of the children to the school. Thus, putting more demands on the school to do what the parents should do in addition to their normal school functions.

Parents now push over the responsibility of caring for their children to the school. Many young children who would have been at home at about two years have been pushed over to the school. The tasks thus become enormous for the teachers and the school management to carry leading to many children being neglected, despised and abused on a daily basis. This clearly undermines the provision for the right of the child on 'protection against indecent and inhuman treatment like abuse and neglect' earlier stated. Rather, the child has been subjected to all kinds of maltreatment, is not protected, valued nor defended. Most times, the treatment meted out to young children as corrective measures constitutes one form of abuse or the other.

It is evident that child abuse is a serious global problem that is deeply rooted in cultural, economic and social practices and occurs in a variety of ways and places. According to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDA, 2006) reported by Gelles (2009) in the United States for instance, more than 900,000

children suffer severe or life threatening injury and some (1,000 to 2,000) children die as a result of abuse and those who survive often suffer emotional trauma that may take long for the bruises to be healed. In the same vein, our Nigerian society is still plagued with incidences of child labour, child maltreatment, child marriage, child trafficking, neglect, and child prostitution. The effect of such abuses are many and varied including teenage pregnancies/mothers, youth restiveness and violence, cultism, youth decadence, joblessness, armed bandits, molestations, and school dropouts. These menaces have eaten into the life of most Nigerian children.

These abuses take place not only at home and undertaken by persons known to and trusted by the child, but also in the school where the child spends a greater part of his/her early life. In most literature, child abuse is studied as it relates to the home and the society. Few authors have bothered to look into the issue of the child as it relates with the school system. The fact that the society has a strong belief in education system (school) in the task of helping children develop their abilities, attitudes, values and good judgement may make one not to think of child abuse as occurring in the school. Yet, incidence of abuse abound in schools and sometimes in subtle ways unknown to the school authorities but at the same time posing serious dangers to children at the same time having damaging and far more consequences on the life of the child. If the school, which is supposed to be a custodian of knowledge as well as functioning as an avenue for the optimum development of the child fosters and indulges in child abuse, then one wonders how children will benefit from the process of education.

The question one is bound to ask is why are there still incidence of child abuse in the school? Is it that the school authorities do not understand what constitutes child abuse or overlook these abuses since they are ingrained in our culture? What are the implications of child abuse to the education system? It is in answer to these questions that this paper sets out to discuss the incidence of child abuse and its impact on the educational system in Nigeria.

### **What is Child Abuse?**

There is no generally accepted definition of child abuse as a result of differences in the perception of what generally is acceptable as

abusive or not. The African Network for Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN) defines child abuse as “the intentional, unintentional or well intentional acts which endanger the physical health, emotional, moral and the educational welfare of children.

Child abuse can be seen as any act of omission or commission, physical or psychological mistreatment or neglect of a child by its parents, guardians, caregiver or other adults that may endanger the child’s physical, psychological or emotional health and development. In this definition, wrongfully mistreating a child or selfishly making an unfair use of a child’s services by adults responsible for the child constitutes child abuse. Thus the adult may not be directly related to the child but a person in whose care the child is left can be an abuser. This may include the educators, healthcare workers, day care workers, or other responsible adults (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2008).

### **Forms of Child Abuse**

Child abuse can be broadly categorized into five perspectives namely physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and child exploitation (child labour).

*Physical Abuse:* Physical abuse may be seen as the inflicting of a non-accidental bodily injury on a child. The injury may not have been intended by the parent or caretaker and is not an accident but may be due to over-discipline or corporal punishment that may not be appropriate or is unjustifiable for the child at that age.

*Emotional Abuse:* Emotional abuse is also known as verbal abuse, mental abuse or psychological maltreatment. The National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information (2006) defines emotional abuse as “acts or omissions by the parents or other caregivers that have caused, or could cause serious behavioural, cognitive, emotional or mental disorders”. Emotional abuse can thus be seen as any attitude, behaviour or failure to act on the part of a caregiver which interferes with a child’s mental health, social development or sense of self-worth. It is probably the least understood, yet the most prevalent, cruelest and destructive type of

abuse. It attacks the child self-concept making the child see his/herself as unworthy, worthless and incapable. When a child is constantly humiliated, shamed, terrorized or rejected the child suffers more than if he/she had been physically maltreated. The resulting effect is that most children often withdraw to themselves leading to depression and lack of concentration in school (Khartri, 2004).

*Sexual Abuse:* Sexual abuse is defined by CAPTA (Khartri, 2004) as the employment, use of persuasion, inducement, enticement, or coercion of any child to engage in, or assist any other person to engage in, any sexually explicit conduct or simulation of such conduct for the purpose of producing a visual depiction of such conduct. It is the rape, and in cases of caretaker or interfamilial relationships, statutory rape, molestation, prostitution, or other forms of sexual exploitation of children or incest with children. As a result of the secrecy that characterizes these cases, sexual abuse is the most often under-reported form of child maltreatment. Sexually abused children experience emotional problems from a feeling of guilt and shame (Corwin & Olafson, 1997).

*Neglect:* This is a failure to provide basic needed care for the child such as shelter, food, clothing, education, supervision, medical care and other basic necessities needed for the child physical, intellectual and emotional development. It is a situation where the guardians or parents fail to perform tasks that are necessary for the well being of the child which invariably can lead to the child's health and safety being endangered.

*Child Exploitation:* Child exploitation often referred to as child labour or child trafficking involves the use of a child in work or other activities for the benefit of others. Child exploitation is a systematic process of using children to work with little or no compensation and consideration for their health and safety (Newton, 2001). These children are used to do hard works in the farms that are above their ages and some are made to hawk wares for long hours without food. Such children rarely benefit from education and will eventually drop out of school. By the time these children reach

adulthood, they are physically, emotionally, morally and intellectually damaged.

### **Prevalence of Child Abuse and its Implications for the Educational System**

The different forms of abuse stated above occur in schools in very subtle way and could have damaging effects on children's educational development. Some of these abuses are enumerated hereunder. This is not exhaustive but shows that abuse is on going in the school.

Physical abuse is one form of abuse that persistently occurs in schools especially in the form of correction or corporal punishment. According to Straus (1994) corporal punishment is the use of physical force with the intention of causing bodily pain, but not injury for the purpose of correction or control. In many schools in the USA, corporal punishment has been declared illegal. This is not so in Nigeria where corporal punishment is being held in high esteem as a way of correcting and instilling discipline in young children. Even though spanking is culturally approved for correcting children most times the teachers do this in anger and in the process the child is left injured and physically inflicted with bruises and pains.

Teachers hold great expectations of young children and so when these children fall short of these expectations, they are mercilessly flogged. Children are flogged for committing minor offences like coming to school late or failure to do home work and for other major offences like fighting and insulting others. Most teachers and school authorities assume that children are stubborn, undisciplined and unintelligent and the only way to drive out this 'foolishness' from the children is to use the rod in order not to spoil the child.

Most times, the teachers fail to listen to the students' apparent show of some misbehaviour. They hold more strongly to their beliefs and ideals that they are unwilling to hear the students out. Thus they unleash corporal punishment on the students at the slightest provocation leaving the students scared and unwilling to attend school. Agnew (1983) however advised against the use of

physical punishment as it may lead to children committing delinquent act such as abandoning school.

In recent times, the use of more positive forms of behaviour modification is advocated such as persuasion, appeal to reason and good judgment plus the reward for desirable forms of behaviour. In addition, there is also the belief that there should be unconditional acceptance and regard for the learner and recognition that the child is worthy and should be treated not as an animal but a human being with feelings. It is believed that if these strategies are used, children will be willing to attend and be active partakers in the education system.

Teachers and students unintentionally inflict emotional pains on students. For instance in an attempt to punish students for misbehaviour, teachers usually ask students to kneel or stand with one foot in front of the classroom. In one nursery school visited, students reported that their teacher usually ask them to demonstrate as if they were "riding a bicycle". The mere fact that they are being punished in front of other students lower their self-esteem and if constantly punished that way may lead to poor performance, hostility, apathy and eventual dropping out of school. Other punishments adopted include threatening or terrorizing students as well as belittling them. Instances abound in schools where teachers use sinister languages in addressing students such words/phrases like 'idiots', 'never do well', 'I knew you'll never perform better', etc. This use of words/phrases not only belittles the child but may ridicule and lead to lack of concentration and withdrawal of students to themselves and eventual dislike of school.

Confining students to dark rooms is used in many schools as a form of punishment. In one school, a child reported that those who did not pay fees were packed into the assembly hall and locked up until the school was over. The school ended up punishing innocent children instead of their parents whose responsibility it is to pay the fees. The children are not only embarrassed but missed out on what was taught during those periods of confinement as those lessons would not be repeated again even after they had had their fees paid.

Teachers have also been found who fail to provide love, support, care and guidance to children under their care. A particular instance was reported where a child had stayed for the first three years in

school and could not handle a pencil. On interview, it was found that the teacher completely abandoned the child because he was slow in learning. It took the intervention of a lesson teacher and parents extra coaching to train the child to write. This shows the inability of the teacher to provide appropriate guidance needed by the child.

Bullying is another form of emotional abuse that takes place in schools. The senior or older students who should provide emotional support for the younger and new students easily bully them. This can easily affect the children and make them withdraw from associating with other peers leading to personal-social maladjustment.

The points enumerated show that teachers/school authorities intentionally/unintentionally indulge in emotional abuse which ultimately affects the child's ability to learn. This can also distract them from gaining meaningfully from the process of education leading to eventual abandonment of school. Learning can only take place in a conducive environment that promotes cordial relationship between the teacher and the learner. Thus the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Union Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child provide for the protection of the child against physical and psychological abuse, discrimination and all forms of threat, be they with weapons or words.

Incidence of sexual abuse abounds everywhere in homes, schools and the society and interferes with the normal, healthy development of the child. In schools especially where there are young male teachers, there is the tendency for the teachers to take advantage of the young, innocent, harmless and naïve school girls. Some teachers lure these students who sometimes transfer their parental affection to them, into having illicit affairs and relationship. At other times, the teachers deny the students their right and grades in demand for sexual gratification.

The relationship is not only between male teachers and female students but also extends to that between male teachers and male students especially in the boys' school. These male teachers do not only fondle and play with the students genitals but also may force these young ones to play with their own and go ahead to commit homosexual acts. The same also goes for the relationship between female teachers and female students especially in girls' school.

Incidence of lesbianism occurs frequently and the students may find it difficult to report these cases.

This unfortunate situation is quite disheartening, yet it is happening on a daily basis. For teachers to allow themselves to descend so low in luring and sometimes forcing students into affairs is contrary to the ethics of the profession and degrades the teachers self-worth and dignity.

Teachers should realize that they are called into the profession to safe guard and protect the young ones under their care and as such should create an environment devoid of any hindrance to students' active participation in school. The consequences of sexual activities involving teenage students and their school teachers include unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases such as Gonorrhoea and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) which could lead to eventual withdrawal of the child from school.

In schools, some form of neglect can be identified which can have damaging effect on the educational development of a child. In terms of physical neglect, some schools may fail to provide adequate supervision, safety and hygiene for their school children. In this era where children under two years are sent to school, it sometimes becomes too cumbersome for teachers to deal with a large number of them at the same time providing the proper attention that is required. In some day care centers, children are left to play and soil their clothes while others are left with wet diapers unattended to for hours.

For older children in nursery/primary sections, the teachers do not have the time to go round and supervise the children when copying notes or doing class work. The students also are left to play unattended to and in the process get serious injuries which could lead to their being hospitalized and having to miss school for days or weeks.

As a result of not providing appropriate school needs for the children such as good seating arrangements, enough classrooms, writing boards and other school materials, children are made to learn under very hard and harsh school conditions. It is not uncommon in public primary schools to find children studying in a classroom with leaking roof or under shades of trees or very dilapidated classroom blocks. This gives room for children to play truant ultimately having very serious effect on their learning ability.

Very few teachers if there are any, have time to attend to the emotional needs of the pupils in their classroom. Sometimes a child comes in late to school, sleeps through the class period or pays no attention in the classroom and yet the teachers do not show any sign of affection or love towards such children. This may have been children rejected by their parents who now feel that the best place to send them is the school. At the school, the child is made to feel less than a human being. Such a child becomes alienated and may withdraw from the school. Gaudin (1999) reported that neglected children have the worst delays in language comprehension and expression while the psychological neglected children score lowest in Intelligence Quotient tests. It therefore becomes pertinent that teachers and the school authority should pay attention to the needs of each and every pupil in the classroom in order to encourage pupils learning.

Students also fall ill in schools and are left unattended to until the school is over. They therefore do not benefit in the classroom during those days. It is therefore necessary that each school should have a sick bay where students can be treated until their parents pick them up. The sick bays should also be adequately stocked with relevant drugs.

Child exploitation apart from being carried out at home by the parents also takes place in the school. Some teachers use children to work in their farm. Children are also sent out by their teachers to fetch water, cook, and wash clothes at the time they should be learning. Some of the children are not conversant with these kinds of works, it therefore present challenges and could affect their health.

The precious time that could have been used for studying is wasted on jobs that have no relevant to academic pursuit and this can have serious effect on students' ability to concentrate in the class. This type of trend should be seriously investigated and teachers warned to desist from such acts.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has been able to show that child abuse and neglect is a global problem that takes place in many setting one of which is the school. Child abuse as discussed has serious implications on the educational system in Nigeria. It presents a serious draw back on the

child educational development and thus hinders societal growth and development. The problem of child abuse in the education system requires adequate and efficient handling in order to improve educational development.

### **Recommendations**

In the light of the serious consequences of child abuse especially when carried out in the education system, it is therefore recommended that:

1. There should be public enlightenment programmes to combat mass ignorance and public awareness on the right to freedom from all forms of child abuse.
2. As much as possible, teachers/caregivers should avoid the use of corporal punishment because it only teaches children that violence is the best way of maintaining control and it encourages them to hit other children,
3. There should be provision of nurturing and supportive child friendly school, learning environment free from noise, distractions, discrimination and abuse of any kind;
4. A child should not be disciplined when the adult's anger is out of control
5. Intense awareness should be created among teachers and school managers using seminars, workshops and training programmes about what constitutes child abuse
6. All forms of abuse should be exposed to this class of caregivers so as to draw their attention to some of the unintentional acts that bother on child abuse
7. Teaching profession should be professionalized to ensure that there is no one teaching as a second best option, this would ensure that people in this profession really see it as their contribution to society's development.
8. Penalty for teachers' who commit sexual abuse with their students should be severe enough to deter other perpetrators.

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