

## THE CRISIS OF STUDENT MISBEHAVIOR IN ZIMBABWEAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS: TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ON IMPACT OF MACRO SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

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### Abstract

*Zimbabwe experienced unprecedented socioeconomic challenges between 2000 and 2008. In this same period, public schools recorded an increase in cases of student misbehavior. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory of human development, we investigated teachers' perceptions of the influence of socioeconomic factors on student misbehavior. Our findings show that most teachers perceived the prevailing macro socioeconomic environment as having a significant impact on student misbehavior. Teachers also perceived socioeconomic factors as negatively affecting their capacity to deal with student misbehavior. We concluded, from this case study, that socioeconomic factors should be taken into consideration when formulating strategies to deal with student misbehavior.*

**Keywords:** Student misbehavior, indiscipline, socioeconomic challenges

### Introduction

Zimbabwe experienced unprecedented socioeconomic and political challenges between 2000 and 2008. These challenges were characterized by high inflation, high unemployment levels, shortage of basic commodities, deteriorating public services, and politically motivated violence, which led to massive exodus of professionals to neighboring countries and abroad (Kapungu, 2008). In the same period, an alarming increase of student misbehavior in public secondary schools was reported (Booyesen, 2008; Dehwa, 2004; Manguvo, 2008). Misdeeds reported included vandalism, theft, substance abuse, and even prostitution. For example, Booyesen (2008) reported an increase in cases of prostitution by secondary school girls and truant youths wearing school uniforms roaming the streets in gangs during school time.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) argues that economic and political conditions in a particular country strongly influence children's behavior. Drawing on this ecological theory of human development, our goal in this case study was to identify socioeconomic factors that impacted on student behavior in public schools, and how, according to teachers' perceptions, these contextual attributes influenced students' misbehavior. Recently, a study in Colombia showed that socioeconomic challenges had an influence on bullying behavior among high school students (Chaux, 2009). Several studies have also shown that political violence negatively influences student misbehavior (Barber, 1999; Chaux, 2009; Chaux, Molano, Podlesky, 2009). Additionally, earlier studies done in Zimbabwe during the 2000-2008 unstable period revealed negative impact of economic collapse and political instability on students' academic achievement (Chiviru, 2009; Kapungu, 2009; Masuko, 2003). However, our study is different from these other studies done in Zimbabwe in that we investigated

teachers' perceptions of the influence of socioeconomic factors on public secondary school students' behavior. We, therefore, investigated in detail the types of behavior problems teachers encountered and how, according to teachers, socioeconomic factors were linked to those behaviors. In addition, we also investigated how socioeconomic factors impacted on teachers' capabilities to deal with student misbehavior. We, herein report that teachers perceived socioeconomic factors as having a negative influence on student misbehavior. This study, therefore, provides a different perspective on how socioeconomic challenges can influence student misbehavior and can potentially provide a framework for educators when formulating strategies for dealing with student misbehavior in countries facing similar challenges.

### **The Sample**

Teachers at six public secondary schools were selected in Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe. Random sampling procedures were used to select 20 participants at each of the six schools who responded to the questionnaire for an initial sample of 120 participants. Five respondents were then randomly selected from each school sample to create a pool of 30 respondents who were interviewed. Of the 120 participants, 51 (43%) were male and 69 (57%) were female. The participants' teaching experience ranged from 1 - 34 years. Sixty percent of the participants were certified teachers while 40% were uncertified relief teachers.

### **Research Instruments**

The study used a questionnaire made of a set of Likert-scaled questions. The questionnaire had four items (excluding the demographic section) which were derived from earlier informal interviews conducted with teachers. Ideas that were perceived as representative of the main beliefs were used to create the questionnaire items, which were then sorted into four categories. Item 1 asked participants if there was a general breakdown of discipline at their school. Item 2 required participants to respond to the frequency with which they encountered specific behavior problems. Item 3 asked teachers to indicate the extent to which proposed socioeconomic factors contributed to student misbehavior. Item 4 required them to indicate the frequency with which they used specific strategies to manage misbehavior. A pilot study was carried out before the main study to beta test the questionnaire and eliminate unclear items. The questionnaire was revised after the beta test. Interviews were conducted soon after the completion of the questionnaire. In addition, documents such as school enrolment records, codes of conduct, disciplinary record books, and teachers' attendance records were also analyzed to get information pertinent to this study.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were then statistically analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 14.0). Chi-square ( $X^2$ ) tests were used to determine whether there was a significant difference in perception among certified and uncertified teachers.

### **Results**

Item 1 required respondents to indicate whether there was a breakdown of discipline at their schools. Results showed that 111 teachers (92%) agreed that there was a general breakdown of discipline in their schools while only 9 teachers (8%) disagreed

with that view. No significant differences were noted between certified and uncertified teachers on their responses to this item. ( $p > 0.05$ ).

Item 2 asked how frequent certain behavior problems occurred. The most common behavior problems were coming to school late (88%), skipping classes (78%) and not doing assigned work (80%). Additional forms of misbehavior included stealing (63%), vandalism of school property (59%), and disrespecting teachers (53%). Problems of smoking (37%) and drug use (28%) were reported as occurring least frequently (see Table 1). A chi-square test showed that more uncertified teachers had students who disrespecting teachers ( $p < 0.05$ ), and skipped classes ( $p < 0.05$ ) more than was the case with certified teachers.

Item 3 asked the extent to which teachers agreed that the outlined socioeconomic factors influenced student misbehavior. Teachers responded that inadequate human resources (88%) and poverty (80%) were serious causes of student misbehavior. Additionally, low teacher morale (78%), permissive school (74%) and home environments (71%) were also rated as contributing to student misbehavior (see Table 3). No significant differences were noted between certified and uncertified teachers on their responses to socioeconomic causes of student misbehavior ( $p > 0.05$ ).

Item 4 of the questionnaire required teachers to indicate the frequency with which they used specific strategies to manage student misbehavior. Results showed that 49% used corporal punishment, 45% consulted parents, 40% ignored student misbehavior, 37% used strenuous acts such as kneeling on sand and 28% sent misbehaving students to the principal's office (See Table 3). Chi-square tests revealed that significantly more uncertified teachers preferred to send misbehaving pupils to the principal compared with certified teachers ( $p < 0.05$ ). In contrast, certified teachers preferred to consult parents ( $p < 0.05$ ) and to use corporal punishment ( $p < 0.05$ ) more than uncertified teachers.

## Discussion

The fact that nearly all teachers said that there was a breakdown of discipline at their schools reveals that a negative learning situation prevailed, and that there was a significant problem of student misbehavior in the six Harare secondary schools that participated in this study. This finding is consistent with an earlier study by Dehwa (2004), which also reported an alarming increase of student misbehavior in Zimbabwean public schools. In his study Dehwa (2004) proposed that teachers failed to enforce disciplinary rules in schools. Our goal was to determine if the prevailing socioeconomic situation had significant effects on student misbehavior and also whether socioeconomic factors also limited teachers' capacity and commitment in dealing with student misbehavior.

Our findings show that most teachers perceived socioeconomic factors as having a negative influence on student misbehavior. This study revealed that teachers rated the shortage of teachers in public schools as one of the main factors contributing to the increase in cases of student misbehavior. Because of the poor remuneration and political victimization, a significant number of certified secondary school teachers in Harare and throughout Zimbabwe were leaving the profession preferring to work as unskilled laborers in neighboring countries like South Africa and Botswana. As a result the number of certified teachers in public schools reportedly dropped by nearly 50% between 1995 and 2008 (Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe, 2008). Although efforts were made to replace

positions left by the certified teachers by employing uncertified personnel who had only completed high school, most public schools were still operating at an average of 55% staff capacity by July 2008 (Mawadza, 2009). Under these conditions, most students were left without teacher guidance for long periods of time, leaving many students in schools unattended, thus creating a fertile ground for misbehavior and also allowing them time to embark on acts of misbehavior. It is not surprising that as a result of shortages of teachers in public schools, cases of vandalism of school property, student fighting, and cases of students insulting each other were reportedly increasing. This was further compounded by the fact that the remaining teachers were frequently absent from work mainly due to frequent organized strikes for better wages and insufficient bus fares for teachers to travel to their schools daily. In addition, the cholera outbreak which claimed nearly 5000 lives in Zimbabwe and infected more than 100 000 people in 2008 (World Health Organization, 2009) resulted in many teachers missing school due to fear of contracting cholera at schools. Our review of teachers' log books revealed that at one point on average teachers showed up for duty an average of two days per week.

Given the prevailing situation, it was not surprising that 78% of the teachers who participated in this study perceived low teacher morale as significantly impacting the development of student misbehavior in public secondary schools. Most of the teachers who were interviewed said that they were unmotivated to fulfill all of their required professional duties because they needed to concentrate on pursuing other income generating activities to supplement their meager teaching salaries. The fact that nearly half of the respondents indicated that they ignored misbehaving students is a clear indication of how low teacher morale as a result of socioeconomic challenges could have led to teachers failing to fulfill their professional duties.

Since public secondary schools are mainly funded by the government, the general economic collapse during this period had a tremendous effect on the government's provision of basic teaching and learning materials for these schools. The U.S. embassy (2009) reported that the Zimbabwean government spent an average of just 18 cents per year per student in 2008, down from an average of about \$6 in 1999. Similarly, Mawadza's (2009) survey of Harare schools in 2008 found that most public schools had not received government grants for more than five consecutive years. As a result, most public schools in Zimbabwe operated without basic resources such as furniture and books, a scenario that further demoralized the remaining teachers. As a result, many teachers reportedly abandoned classes, thus creating a room for the development of misbehaviors such as vandalism and fighting.

In this study, teachers also identified permissive home environments as contributing highly to student misbehavior, sighting an increase in child-headed households. It is estimated that between 3 and 4 million Zimbabweans migrated to neighboring countries between 2000 and 2007 (Buhlungu, Daniel, Southall & Lutchman, 2007). Most of these immigrants left their children behind under the guardianship of relatives or abandoned them to take care of themselves, thus, creating permissive environments for acts of misconduct. Manguvo (2007) reported that child-headed homes were often venues for acts of misconduct such as drug abuse, smoking and sexual misconduct. In addition, this situation was made worse by the fact that Zimbabwe had one of the highest rates of HIV and AIDS infections in southern Africa (Chirenje, Loeb, Mwale, Nyamapfeni, Kamba, & Padian, 2002), resulting in many children growing up without biological parents. It is reportedly argued that out of a total population of about 12 million people, Zimbabwe's orphan population under the age of 15 grew from 345,000 in 1996 to about 1.3 million in 2006 (National Aids Council, 2006).

Evans and Miguel (2007) found that Kenyan students who do not have the guardianship of biological parents had higher rates of misbehavior and absenteeism from schools. In addition, Downess and Rock (1986) state that students from child-headed homes have a tendency of being more rebellious and non-compliant at school.

It was, not surprising that a significant number of teachers (80%) perceived poverty as a major cause of some forms of misbehavior. With an unemployment level of 80% (United Nations Development Program, 2008) and an official annual inflation of nearly 231 million percent in July 2008, teachers reported that cases of students involved in theft and prostitution in order to meet daily needs were on the rise. In addition, a number of students skipped classes to engage in informal jobs as vendors. Thus, the impact of such factors on the student's conduct cannot be underestimated.

We wanted to determine whether socioeconomic challenges also impacted on the strategies that teachers use in dealing with student misbehavior. Our findings show that a significant number of teachers neither reported misbehaving students to the school principal nor consulted parents when faced with cases of student misbehavior. Previous studies reported teacher-parent collaboration as key to decreasing levels of students' antisocial behavior (Kazdin, 2003; Leve & Chamberlain, 2005). However, some of the teachers interviewed in this case study indicated that most misbehaving students did not live with their biological parents, which made concerted effort between teachers and parents difficult. As a result, nearly half of the teachers in this study admitted to using corporal punishment and strenuous acts like making students kneel on sand for lengthy periods despite the fact that they were fully aware of the statutes that forbade the use of corporal punishment and strenuous acts in schools. However, they argued that given the staff shortages at their schools, they found corporal punishment to be one of the most effective ways of instilling discipline in misbehaving students.

Another interesting observation in our study was that uncertified teachers encountered more behavior problems and that most of them reportedly sort assistance from the school administrators in dealing with misbehaving students. Since most these teachers in this sample had just finished high school, this could point to a limitation in their ability to deal with students' conduct. We, therefore, propose that in situations where massive numbers of untrained teachers are recruited, they at least undergo short courses on how to deal with student misbehavior.

We concluded from this study that some of the behavior perceived as acts of misconduct were actually a reflection of the prevailing socioeconomic environment. For example, the high occurrence of student absenteeism, skipping classes and coming to school late, were partly attributable to transportation problems encountered in Harare during this period. As a result of fuel shortages that were frequently encountered, the efficiency of the public transport system at the time was compromised. Consequently, many students had to walk long distances to school, explaining why some of them skipped classes or arrived at school late. This situation was further compounded by the inability of parents to afford daily bus fares so that their children could attend school because of the significant negative effect of hyperinflation, thereby causing even more students to skip classes. Additionally, some female teachers raised concerns about increased girls' absenteeism, which could be attributed to difficult conditions in managing their menses due to unavailability of sanitary pads, forcing girls to skip classes when they were having menses. However, it cannot be ruled out that some students might have taken advantage of this chaotic situation to deliberately skip

classes and absent themselves from schools.

## Conclusion

Although some researchers hold students directly accountable for their misbehavior as reported by Frymier, (1998), in this case study, we looked at student misbehavior from a socio-ecological perspective. Our findings agree with findings reported from other regions across the world experiencing socioeconomic challenges and we conclude by noting that multiple social contexts and their interconnections have a significant impact on student contact at schools. In this study, most teachers perceived Zimbabwe's economic collapse as negatively influencing the development and increasing the occurrence of student misbehavior in public secondary schools. In addition, we also concluded that socioeconomic factors also negatively affected teachers' capacity to proactively intervene on student misbehavior. Because high prevalence of student misbehavior has long-term negative effects on society at large, we recommend that educationists should keep socioeconomic factors in mind when formulating policies to address discipline issues in schools. We further highlight in this study, the need for considering teachers' perceptions when formulating discipline policies because they are the ones who deal with the vast majority of discipline issues.

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**Table 1. Teachers' responses to frequencies with which they encountered certain behavior problems**

Type of misbehavior	Seldom	Often/Very often	Certified	Uncertified	Chi-square
Coming to school late	15 (13%)	105 (87%)	65 (83%)	40 (95%)	NS
Not doing assigned work	24 (20%)	96 (80%)	59 (76%)	37 (88%)	NS
Disrespecting teachers	56 (47%)	74 (53%)	40 (51%)	34 (81%)	0.0484*
Leaving school before time	60 (50%)	60 (50%)	35 (45%)	25 (59%)	NS
Skipping classes	28 (23%)	92 (77%)	51 (65%)	41 (98%)	0.0544*
Stealing	44 (37%)	76 (63%)	46 (59%)	30 (71%)	NS
Vandalizing school property	49 (41%)	71 (59%)	42 (54%)	29 (69%)	NS
Fighting with fellow pupils	59 (49%)	61 (51%)	37 (47%)	24 (57%)	NS
Consuming alcohol	54 (45%)	66 (55%)	37 (47%)	29 (69%)	NS
Smoking	76 (63%)	44 (37%)	25 (32%)	19 (45%)	NS
Taking drugs	87 (73%)	33 (27%)	23 (29%)	13 (31%)	NS

**Table 2. Teachers' responses to causes of misbehavior**

Type of misbehavior	Very much	Slightly/ Not at all	Certified	Uncertified	Chi-square
Poverty	96 (80%)	24 (20%)	65 (51%)	40 (51%)	NS
Over-permissive home environments	85 (71%)	33 (29%)	66 (51%)	30 (51%)	NS
Over-permissive school environments	89 (74%)	32 (36%)	40 (51%)	34 (81%)	NS
Low teacher morale	93 (78%)	27 (22%)	35 (51%)	25 (51%)	NS
Teacher shortages	105 (88%)	15 (12%)	51 (65%)	41 (98%)	NS
Teacher absenteeism	96 (80%)	23 (20%)	51 (65%)	41 (98%)	NS

**Table 3. Teachers' responses to strategies used to manage misbehavior**

Type of misbehavior	Seldom	Often/Very often	Certified	Uncertified	Chi-square
Sending to principal	88 (73%)	32 (27%)	13 (17%)	19 (45%)	0.003**
Consulting parents	66 (55%)	52 (45%)	41 (52%)	11 (26%)	0.036*
Ignoring	72 (60%)	48 (40%)	30 (38%)	18 (43%)	NS
Corporal punishment	61 (50%)	59 (50%)	46 (59%)	13 (31%)	0.037*
Strenuous acts	76 (63%)	42 (37%)	31 (40%)	11 (26%)	NS