



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Management of learners with conduct disorders in Nkayi Rural District Primary Schools in Zimbabwe.

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## Abstract

Zimbabwe has adopted an inclusive education system in order to address barriers to learning for children with conduct disorders. The management of learners with conduct disorders is hampered by the lack of teachers' skills and knowledge in guidance and counselling of learners with conduct disorders. In this paper, the researcher identifies the challenges in the management of learners with conduct disorders in Nkayi District primary schools and explores suggestions on the best and convenient ways of managing these learners. A qualitative research approach and a phenomenological research design were employed in which ten teachers in rural primary schools were interviewed to solicit their views, experiences and observations on the management of learners with conduct disorders in primary schools. The study concluded that the management of learners with conduct disorders in rural primary schools may not be successful without considerate guidance and counselling modalities in schools.

Keywords: Learners with conduct disorders, Inclusive Education, Emotional and behavioural disorders, conduct disorder, Management.

## INTRODUCTION

It has been a mammoth task to manage learners with conduct disorders with the existence of binding policies that influence the nature of discipline in schools. One of the greatest underserved populations in the schools today is that of learners with severe emotional and behavioural problems (Frick & Lonely, 1999). These learners are common and many of us have come into contact with them or observed them interacting with their peers and teachers in and out of school. In fact, just about every parent or teacher has at some time or another been frustrated and annoyed by their student's behaviour. Some behavioural circumstances are normally controllable but when they become chronic, excessive and far beyond the normal expected at a certain age, they become genesis of disorders. Learners with conduct disorders are normally included in the mainstream schools and in most situations teachers in these schools might not know of the presence of the disorder when the children are enrolled. Parents of the learner may also not know that their child has a serious problem and even if they have little knowledge on that, they may fear that their child

will be refused entry in such less inclusive schools. School heads, like other teachers, although responsible for admitting diverse learners into the schools, may not be in a position to tell on admission that a learner has a serious problem, and they depend on parents and guardians to inform them. So children with conduct disorders in Nkayi rural primary schools attend schooling alongside other learners in the regular classroom taught by regular teachers.

The definition of conduct disorders in different contexts, due to some overlapping norms and societal expectations, might be a problem in identifying, diagnosing, explaining causes and managing conduct disorders in rural primary schools. According to Gudyanga, Nyamande and Wadesango (2013), many factors contribute to the difficulty in defining the conduct conditions, among which are; lack of a single symptom common to all, no precisely defined normal behaviour and that the variability expectation differs. With this regard, Kauffman (1997) observed that there are many definitions currently available which indicate that the behaviour deviates in an extreme way from the norm, recurs chronically, violets social or cultural expectation and requires intervention. According to Gudyanga, Nyamande and Wadesango (2013), conduct disorders are easier to identify than to define or classify as compared to other behavioural dimensions such as anxiety-withdrawal, socialised aggression, immaturity/ or attention problems, motor excess and psychotic behaviour. Children with conduct disorders render a noticeable attention-seeking disruptive behaviour, although classroom screening, testing, educational and psychological assessments usually help to confirm the condition. Conduct

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disorders presents complications and significant challenges in its effect on families, teachers, parents and in its management. According to Chimhenga and Mpofu (2016), classroom practitioners and school staff find difficulties in involving the children effectively in the learning process and facilitating their social and emotional development.

According to Pfiffner et al. (2005), excessively aggressive and defiant behaviourally disordered children have interpersonal problems with teachers, peers, parents and significant others. Thus, children with conduct disorders are usually less responsive to social reinforcement, less empathetic and less understanding of peers' behaviours and intentions. Thus, in primary school learners, anti-social behaviours lead to poor adjustment, risk of school failure and membership in defiant peer groups, school dropout, and eventual delinquency. According to Gudyanga, Nyamande and Wadesango (2013), an article in the Chronicle Newspaper of January 6, (2007), where Gweru juveniles appeared in court for murdering another youth on Christmas Eve indicates the gravity of the problem, not only in Gweru but across Zimbabwe. This is gross conduct disorder, which relates to Mabhalabhala girl in Nkayi who murdered their peer on their way from school for a boyfriend (Herald, 2021,). In rural areas, some primary school learners leave home for streets and gold mining (*makorokoza*) because they hardly comply with the rules at home, school or their community. There are also cases of primary school learners who cannot comply with the rules or may have committed serious offences and want to evade trial. The family, school and community are finding it difficult to cope with the psychological demands of those children's criminal tendencies. This, therefore, indicates that there are children with serious behavioural problems of conduct nature that need to be corrected at primary school level before they engage in criminal offences in the adolescence stage. Thus, as a prevention strategy, guidance and counselling can be considered at this early stage where the behaviours usually surface.

### The statement of the problem

The puzzle that is the driving force behind this article is the quest to explore the management of learners with conduct disorders in Nkayi rural primary schools in Zimbabwe. The needs of learners with conduct disorders are not being adequately met in mainstream classroom settings as teachers have not had appropriate training and are still grappling with the implementation of inclusive education system in rural primary schools. The research seeks to answer the following major question: How best can we manage learners with conduct disorders in Nkayi rural primary schools in Zimbabwe?

### The Research Questions

- What obstacles do teachers encounter in managing learners with conduct disorders in primary schools in Nkayi?
- What guidelines can be suggested for the improvement of practice with regard to the management of learners with conduct disorders in primary schools in Nkayi?

### Purpose of the Study

Due to lack of appropriately trained and skilled teachers in inclusive education in most primary schools in Nkayi, an investigation of effective classroom management for learners with conduct disorders has become an urgent necessity. The research aims to identify the challenges to the

management of learners with conduct disorders as experienced by teachers in primary school classrooms in Nkayi and to investigate how teachers understand their role as primary implementers of inclusive education and service providers in psychological counselling and suggest on the best ways of managing learners with conduct disorders in primary schools.

### Literature review

The philosophy of inclusion results in the creation of ways of handling pupils with different abilities, rates of learning and understanding of concepts, learning styles, motivational levels, special educational needs and socio-economic backgrounds (Mafa, 2012). Thus, pupils' different characteristics are bound to present teachers with organisational and didactic challenges. In Zimbabwe, inclusive education has been considered after the realization that approaches such as integration and institutionalization did not reap expected results. Chimhenga (2016) argues that teachers' negative attitudes, lack of resources, lack of proper laid out policies to inform practice, social repercussions such as isolation and stigmatization of children with challenges led to the embarking on inclusive education in Zimbabwe. Notwithstanding this development, according to Mafa (2012), inclusion in Zimbabwe has not been fully embraced as very few children with special educational needs have been included in Zimbabwe's mainstream public schools, with most still institutionalized. More often than not, learners with conduct disorders fail to be cultivated to the limit of their academic potential in the mainstream primary schools due to a number of factors that are both within and without them. Unfortunately, in most cases, the school system blames these learners with conduct disorders for their lack of performance. The presence of inclusive education seems to be having less impact on the management of learners with conduct disorders in Nkayi District primary schools. According to Evans (2003), conduct disorder is a steady pattern of harming others or their property, lying, stealing, or breaking societal rules of behaviour. Children with conduct disorders have a difficult time following school, class rules and behaving in a socially acceptable way. Inclusive education relies on the Salamanca Conference and Framework of Action (UNESCO, 1994) and the management of learners with conduct disorders is based on P36 Educational Policy on discipline (2018 Amended), School Health Policy (2018) and Guidance and Counselling guidelines in primary schools in Zimbabwe (2020) under the banner of the new curriculum. In a research study in Nkayi, Ncube, Muranda and Tshabalala (2015) reveal that some learners in Nkayi primary schools dispose an inability to keep up good, solid social relationships with peers and teachers. The role played by the Department of Psychological Services, Special Needs and Learner Welfare Services in guidance and counselling of children with conduct disorders has been brought into question after escalating misconduct behaviour occurred. For example, in Mabhalabhala area there is a fifteen (15) year old girl who stabbed a classmate on their way from school over a boyfriend (Herald, 2021). Learners in Nkayi District primary schools continue failing to build or maintain satisfactory relationships with their parents, peers and teachers (Ncube, Muranda and Tshabalala, 2015). Thus, headlines in newspapers are a cry for help from all stakeholders as they spell out the need to attend to unmet emotional needs of children through proper guidance and counselling in schools to avoid loss of lives.

Conduct disorder is a serious behavioural and emotional disorder in childhood and adolescence and is characterised by disruptive behaviour and breaking of societal rules. According to Kerekes (2020), conduct disorder is manifested by recurrent antisocial behaviour, for example, lying, fire-setting, truancy, physical aggression or running away that causes distress to caregivers, parents and teachers and significantly impairs the individual's family, peer, school and community adjustment. This is the concern in Nkayi District Primary Schools as established by a study on bullying learners (Ncube, Muranda & Tshabalala, 2015). The area of concern is on the performance of learners with conduct disorders in school settings where such children tend to be of lower academic achievement and show poor levels of pre-social behaviour and siblings or children with conduct disorders have significantly elevated levels of behavioural problems as compared to other children in general (Frick & Clark, 2018). Ncube, Muranda and Tshabalala (2015) confirm that physical bullying is the most common form of conduct disorder in the Nkayi primary schools with boys being chief perpetrators of this vice in schools while peer pressure has been identified as fuelling it. This means that bullying as a form of conduct disorder has been common in Nkayi primary schools.

The rise in prevalence rates of conduct disorders in schools is worrisome and has led to probing of the implementation of inclusive education and management of learners with conduct disorders in primary schools. In a study in the United States by Patel, Amaravadi and Win (2020), the estimated lifetime prevalence of conduct disorders in the United States is 9.6% (12% in males and 7.1% in females) with a median age of onset of 11 years. In a study in Kanke in India, Sarkhel, Sinha and DeSarkar (2006) argue that conduct disorders were found in 4.8 % and the ratio of boys to girls was 4:5:1. In India, prevalence estimates of conduct disorders in children ranges from 0.2 % to 8.7% (Kashani et al, 1987). In a research study in Uganda, Wamulugwa et al (2017) argue that in Sub-Saharan Africa, from a specialised clinic at Mulago National Referral hospital, 8.57% had conduct disorders. Several studies conducted in other sub-Saharan countries reported prevalent rates that range between 1 to 20% (Faraone et al 2003). According to Gudyanga, Nyamande and Wadesango (2013), prevalence rates of conduct disorders are 6% to 16% in boys and 2% to 9% in girls. Conduct disorders afflict 75% of children referred for clinical intervention and have a 40% risk of development into serious psychological disturbances in adulthood (Mpofu 2000). The prevalence rates of conduct disorders in Zimbabwe and other sub-Saharan countries range in the same continuum of 2% to 20%. This means that the problems encountered in the countries such as Uganda can be also encountered in Zimbabwe as prevalence rates of conduct disorders are high as they range up to 20% and this needs attention. Therefore, the carrying out of this study was a way of establishing the presence of conduct disorders in the Nkayi District Primary Schools and if a positive prevalence is revealed, suggestions on how best can we manage learners with conduct disorders in the classroom are welcome.

Conduct disorders in children present significant challenges in its effect on families, teachers and caregivers, together with its treatment. According to Pffifner (2005), excessively aggressive and defiant behaviourally disordered children have interpersonal problems with teachers, peers, parents and significant others. According to Gudyanga, Nyamande and Wadesango (2013), classroom teachers and other school personnel find difficulties in involving the children effectively in the learning process and facilitating their social and emotional development. Children with

conduct disorders are usually less responsive to social reinforcement, less empathetic and less understanding of peers' behaviours and intentions. These anti-social behaviours might lead to poor adjustment, risk of school failure and membership in defiant peer groups, school dropout, and eventual delinquency. Gudyanga, Nyamande and Wadesango (2013) argue that the family, school and community are finding it difficult to cope with the psychological demands of those children's criminal tendencies. This indicates that children with serious behavioural problems of conduct nature need to be understood and well managed at primary school level before engaging in criminal offences in the adolescent stage. Thus, guidance and counselling might be considered at this early stage where the behaviours usually surface. According to the Practical Inclusive Education Handbook for Primary and Secondary Schools (2020), the absence of effective guidance and counselling services within the school and absence of supervision by responsible adults in school activities as well as outside the school such as on the way to or from school are some factors associated with conduct disorders. However, as children spend most of their time in primary schools, counselling is the responsibility of the Schools Psychological Services, Special Needs and Learner Welfare (SPSSNLW) department need to reduce such incidences and create a learner-friendly environment. This research intended to establish the essence of the Psychological Services, Special Needs and Learner Welfare department in embracing Ubuntu values in inclusive education for the learner's benefit in Nkayi Primary Schools.

The Psychological Services, Special Needs and Learner Welfare department in Zimbabwe is responsible for the learner's assessment and planning intervention programmes that are vital in promoting discipline and justice in schools. Parents have to be fully involved in the learning of their children so that they fully benefit from enhanced inclusive education. Chimhenga and Mpofu (2016) recommended that parents should help schools by training children in good personal behaviour which prepares learners to easily adapt to school discipline and crafting of school rules should involve all stakeholders to earn collaboration. In a study on managing students' misconduct behaviour, Chimhenga and Mpofu (2016)'s study recommends that teachers should be staff-developed on the use of co-operative and supportive disciplinary approaches. For learners to fully benefit there is need for teachers to gain knowledge on best ways of equalising opportunities to learning. In light of the findings of the study on bullying in Nkayi by Ncube, Muranda and Tshabalala (2015), it was recommended that schools and communities should consider a well-coordinated approach to develop strong home-school partnerships coupled with wider community-level efforts to teach young people appropriate social-emotional skills, concern for others and an appreciation for civility which are essential to the well-being of society. The study by Ncube, Muranda and Tshabalala (2015) further recommended that schools should also have a very clear policy on anti-bullying and make all concerned aware of the policy and schools can also engage counsellors who can teach both bullies and their victims "empathy training" where students as young as five years old are taught to understand the feelings of others and to treat people with kindness. Qangule (2019) asserts that counsellors should be well-versed with the society they work in so as to reduce cultural biases in their work. This provides psychosocial support to child survivors of conduct problems through personalised psychological support and

the setting up/strengthening of support groups. Schools and communities need to strengthen the protective role of vulnerable families through positive parenting education and connection to support services. Participatory evaluation, training and supervision of schools by all stakeholders and partners to develop and implement action plans on better ways of dealing with conduct disorders can assist in creating safe schools for all children. Presidential Commission on Education of 1999 also alluded to this unfortunate scenario as CIET (1999) recommends that visits to schools to meet the juveniles by the police's Victim Friendly Unit can assist in supporting victims and to making the environment conducive, private and friendly.

According to International Save the Children Alliance (2008), education has a crucial role in post-conflict reconciliation in helping to raise awareness, promote understanding, contribute to reform, contribute to child protection, and support economic regeneration. Therefore, teaching and learning processes focus on the future, aiming at contributing to reconciliation and sustainable, peaceful development.

## METHOD

The nature of this research is essentially qualitative. McMillan and Schumacher (2001:398) maintain that 'qualitative researchers investigate in depth small distinct groups as the researcher is concerned with understanding the social phenomenon from the research participant perspective'. The phenomenological research design is relevant to the research since the aim is to understand and explore perceptions and experiences on how teachers manage learners with conduct disorders in their inclusive classrooms, particularly for a small selected group in their natural setting. The intent of this research is to explore the management of learners with conduct disorders as experienced by teachers in the implementation of inclusive education in primary schools in Nkayi. The teachers will be given a platform to express themselves in the interviews, explaining how they feel about the extent to which learners with conduct disorders are managed in their schools. They will be given an opportunity to make suggestions on how to improve the management of learners with conduct disorders in primary schools.

### The Sample

The sample included 10 teachers (5 females and 5 males) teaching in rural primary schools in Nkayi, Matabeleland North province of Zimbabwe. The schools are implementing inclusive education for children with conduct disorders. The sample was conveniently selected from primary school teachers where the researcher had contact persons for easy data collection.

### Instrumentation

Data collection took place through individual interviews with teachers and school heads. The method of interviewing has been chosen because the quality of data it produces and for its ability to allow the researcher to combine the benefits derived from interviews as well as from participant observation. The researcher also recorded observations made during teaching practice sessions.

## Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. The researcher explained the purpose of the study to the participating teachers and the participants consented to participate in the study where their responses were kept in confidence as their names were not appended to their responses. Participants were also free to withdraw from the study when they felt to do so.

## Data Analysis

Data collected from interviews sessions were qualitatively analysed. Responses from the teachers were analysed to come up with themes related to the research questions. The analyses were based on frequency of similar responses from the participants. Data were explored by reading through all the interview responses as well as from the general observations made during the interview sessions.

## RESULT OF THE STUDY

The findings from the interviews and observation are discussed below:

### What obstacles do teachers encounter in managing learners with conduct disorders in primary schools in Nkayi?

The teachers in the inclusive and regular classes indicated that although inclusion was of benefit to the children, challenges were faced by the teachers in assisting children with behavioural problems especially conduct disorders. Teachers indicated that there were not trained to teach children with conduct disorders, hence to find them in one's class will be creating serious problems. Some of the learners with conduct that are troublesome in the presence of the teacher in the classroom and the teachers do not know how to help such children. Inadequate knowledge with regard to instructional techniques and curricular adaptations, which contributes to decreased confidence, may be factors which influence a teacher's attitude toward properly managing learners with conduct disorders. Teachers also revealed that they could not cope with large numbers of children within the classroom situation. Attending to the child with conduct disorders without adequate knowledge on ways to manage them actually became an extra burden. Consequently, these children tended to be ignored as the teacher focused on other children with good behaviour. Lack of such attention may mean that most pupils' educational concerns will remain unresolved and creating problems for the successful education opportunities for learners with conduct disorders in primary schools in Zimbabwe. The class size impacts on curriculum accessibility due to the difficulties that teachers have in attending to individual needs, class management dynamics and time wasted on attention seeking behaviour.

The teachers indicated that negative perceptions to the management of learners with conduct disorders may become obstacles. Teachers felt that the scraping of corporal punishment has increased misconduct cases in school as it left the teacher powerless in control of classroom disputes. The teachers added that parents, as stakeholders, believe that the included children may slow the pace of the teacher thus negatively affecting their children. The teachers felt

that the government does not have an inclusive education specific policy, but has inclusive education related policies like the Education Act of 2020 and P35, a policy on discipline and punishment which abolishes corporal punishment and advocates for guidance and counselling of learners with behavioural problems and their counterparts.

### **What guidelines can be suggested for the improvement of practice with regard to the management of learners with conduct disorders in primary schools in Nkayi?**

The teachers indicated that there is need to establish a clear and concise mandatory policy and legislation, supported by an Act of Parliament and the Constitution of Zimbabwe that spells out the expectations and roles of the stakeholders in the implementation of inclusive education for children with conduct disorders. The policy should specify how the children with conduct disorders should be managed and assisted by schools. Teachers felt that they have less control of discipline in their classrooms due to unclear policies that can assist the management of learners with conduct disorders. The teachers further revealed that the challenges in managing learners with conduct disorders would be resolved if there would be adequate professional preparation and training of Zimbabwean primary school teachers in inclusive education for children with emotional and behavioural problems. The teachers in primary schools need to be trained in teaching methods that are child-centred and using active and participative learning techniques that improve their confidence, capacity to teach children both with and without conduct disorders in mainstream classes and guidance and counselling modalities.

The teachers also indicated that government should provide more adequate resources, equipment, and teaching material for learners with diverse learning needs and there should be a separate budget for inclusive education so that the issue of resources can be addressed. There is need to cultivate and nurture positive attitudes towards the management of learners with conduct disorders by stakeholders such as teachers, parents and peers in order to manage learners with conduct disorders in primary schools. Parental involvement and involvement of spirituality was cited as of integral to the management of learners with conduct disorders in the school. Teachers lamented for the protection of both learners with conduct disorders and the victims of this situation. It also emerged from this study that schools should train prefects in maintaining order and working collaboratively with teachers in identifying learners with conduct disorders as early as possible.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings indicated that most of the teachers in schools do not have the expertise to deal with conduct disorders in a teaching learning-situation mainstream primary school class. This concurs with Gudyanga, Nyamande and Wadesango (2013) who argue that classroom teachers and other school personnel find difficulties in involving the children effectively in the learning process and facilitating their social and emotional development. It also emerged in this study that teachers in the mainstream primary schools are not adequately trained to deal with children with conduct disorders in their classes. The lack of skills, knowledge and tools to help children with conduct disorders in rural primary schools has a serious negative impact in the management of children with conduct disorders. The present study further revealed that

there was lack of clear guidelines and policies that can improve the management of learners with conduct disorders in primary schools. Similar sentiments were highlighted by Chimhenga (2016)'s study on inclusive education who argues that teachers' negative attitudes, lack of resources, lack of proper laid out policies to inform practice, social repercussions such as isolation and stigmatization of children with challenges hampered inclusive education in Zimbabwe.

The current study revealed that Nkayi rural primary schools should embark on offering guidance and counselling to learners with conduct disorders and the victims. The policy should specify how the children with conduct disorders should be managed and assisted by schools. Teachers felt that they have less control of discipline in their classrooms due to unclear policies that can assist the management of learners with conduct disorders. This study highlights that managing learners with conduct disorders would be resolved if there would be adequate professional preparation and training of Zimbabwean primary school teachers in inclusive education and counselling. Parental involvement, learner protection and involvement of religious and spiritual interventions should be considered in the management of learners with conduct disorders in primary schools.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The study concluded that if the management of learners with conduct disorders is to be a practical possibility in primary schools, there is need for the promulgation of pro-inclusive policies and effective implementation of the policies on discipline. Pro-inclusion policies will then cascade to teacher education institutions, so that pre-service teacher training focuses on inclusive teaching that enhance. Practicing teachers can be equipped with counselling skills through staff developments, in-service teacher development and workshops. The primary school children with conduct disorders could not fully benefit from classroom management and inclusion owing to lack of adequate resources. The study further concluded that the teachers should be adequately trained to assist children with conduct disorders and meet their needs for successfully accessing the school curriculum.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study therefore recommends that;

- Identification of learners with conduct disorders should be done by teachers and parents as early as possible in both boys and girls.
- Staff development and in-service training on guidance and counselling should be considered in management of learners with conduct disorder instead of corporal punishment.
- Parental involvement should be the subject of discipline and punishment in schools.
- Education policies on discipline and punishment should be reviewed such that the teacher's dignity is retained in the management of learners with conduct disorders.
- Prefects should be actively involved in the management of learners with conduct disorders in primary schools.

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