

**Factors influencing anti-social behaviours among learners in Khami District primary schools**

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**Abstract**

*Anti-social behaviour (ASB) among learners is a universal problem with negative consequences in the teaching and learning process. This study set to investigate the factors that contribute to anti-social behaviour among primary school learners in Zimbabwe's Khami district. A qualitative case study was used. Participants were drawn from Khami District primary schools and these included six (6) teachers, six (6) parents, and fourteen (14) learners. In-depth interview schedules and semi-structured questionnaires were used to obtain data from the participants. The study established that ASB is a result of the interaction between biological susceptibilities and environmental stressors. It also emerged from the study that learners who exhibit ASB tend to develop undesirable personalities if there is absence of behaviour modification strategies for rehabilitation. Based on the findings as well as literature review, the study recommended that parents also check for ASB among the school-going children rather than leave this to the schools. Schools should offer guidance and counselling services where learners with ASB are equipped with skills to manage this vice.*

**Keywords:** *Childhood, school, anti-social, learner, behaviour, bully*

**Introduction and Background to the Study**

Anti-social behaviour (ASB) among school learners has become a daunting global problem lately (Kaya, Bilgin & Singer 2012; Ferguson, Boden & Horwood, 2009). Behaviour problems are reported by teachers to be their single highest concern. Mash and Wolfe (2016: 269) define anti-social behaviour as actions that harm or show no consideration for the well-being of others. Antisocial behaviours include *physically aggressive behaviour* such as hitting, kicking, and punching; *relational forms* such as gossip, rumours, social exclusion, threats to other learners,

and *verbal aggression* such as teasing, arguing, insulting and threatening others (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2006). Name-calling, humming, and teasing are also common among children (Blake et al., 2011; Psunder, 2010; Ryan & Bernard, 2009).

Children who engage in ASB are at risk of various adverse developmental outcomes including school dropout, criminal behaviour, and substance dependence (Arono & Ojinnaka, 2009). Anti-social behaviour is not only a burden to victims but a burden to families, teachers, other learners, and even the community. Initiating physical fights, bullying, stubbornness, stealing, lying, vandalising property, cheating, spreading rumours are some examples of ASB found among learners (Silberg, Maes & Eaves, 2012).

Anti-social behaviour among school learners is a leading concern among educators. It has been reported that about ten (10) to twenty-six (26) per cent of learners in both developed and developing countries have ASB problems (Arono & Ojinnaka, 2009; Marais & Meier, 2010). Several studies have been conducted on a global scale to ascertain the prevalence of ASB among primary school learners and the results are a cause for great concern (Khaliq & Rasool, 2019). In a survey carried out by Kimberly and Ariola (2002) in America, four to six million children displayed ASB in school. Hemannsdottir (2017) carried out a study to examine the prevalence of ASB problems that occur in preschools and elementary schools in Iceland. Results showed that behavioural problems were the main part that teachers found difficult to address. The majority of the teachers were dealing with ASB problems in their daily work. The results of a study carried out by Pathak et al. (2011) in India revealed that the prevalence of behavioural problems among school-going adolescents ranged from 13.7% to 50%.

Various studies to ascertain the prevalence of ASB have also been undertaken in the African context. In their study on disruptive behaviour in the foundation phase of schooling in South

Africa, Marais and Meir (2010) found out that all teachers in grades one to three experienced learner behaviour that disrupted classroom activities. There is a high prevalence rate of behavioural problems among primary school children in Nigeria. In a study by Adelekan et al. (1999) in Kwara state, 846 parents completed the 31 item Rutter A2 scale for children aged 6-14 years. Using the Rutter cut- off point of 13, 18.6% were found to have AS behavioural problems.

A study was carried out by Chitiyo et al. (2014) in an attempt to understand the causes of problem behaviours in Zimbabwean schools. Bullying, fighting, violence, truancy, and drug/alcohol abuse were the most prevalent problem behaviours found in schools. The study highlighted that such antisocial behaviours gave rise to learners who are societal outcasts, thereby impinging on their ability to develop into functional members of society.

Although the negative consequences of antisocial behaviour are known, knowledge about factors that are associated with the development of childhood antisocial behaviour is still a topic of investigation. Knowledge of the causes of ASB is important so that the problems could be tackled quickly and correctly (Pardini & Frick, 2013). Whereas studies have been done to suggest factors that influence ASB among secondary school learners, there are few studies done on factors influencing the vice among primary school learners. This study was set to investigate factors that influence anti-social behaviour among primary school learners in Khami District.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Learners with antisocial behaviour (ASB) problems in Khami District are often struggling with multifarious and serious problems affecting their lives, families, and school. Antisocial behaviour has become one of the major and serious problems for society and nations all over the world (Blake et al., 2011; Khaliq & Rasool, 2019). Therefore, there is an urgent need to

ascertain the causative factors of ASB in a bid to provide strategies for managing this kind of behaviour.

### **Aim of the study**

The study sought to investigate the causes of antisocial behaviour among primary school learners in Khami district.

### **Research Question**

The study was guided by the following question:

What are the main causes of antisocial behaviour among primary school learners in Khami district?

### **Significance of the Study**

The current study will add to the body of knowledge by demonstrating how both family and school influence children's behaviour at the primary school level. School authorities would be enlightened through empirical evidence about factors leading to ASB in their schools so that they may take practical mitigatory measures to curb the phenomenon.

The educators and learners may benefit from the study since the factors that lead to ASB among learners will be identified. Once common causes of ASB are understood it becomes easier to deal with the learner and to take action to prevent similar misbehaviour in the future.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The ecological model was the primary theoretical framework for conceptualising anti-social behaviour. Bronfenbrenner's work has been one of the most influential advances in human development. The model was created to provide a context for child development (Rappleyea,

2009). This theory has recently been named ‘bioecological systems theory’ to emphasise that a child’s biology is a primary environment fuelling his/her development. The bioecological systems theory is a useful orientation for the prediction of antisocial behaviour.

Given that ABS is on the rise, it is paramount to delve into the factors that may be promoting antisocial behavioural tendencies amongst school learners. Mwamwenda (2010) asserts that according to Bronfenbrenner the child lives and develops in multiple contexts, each of which has the potential to influence how this development occurs (Refer to Figure 1).

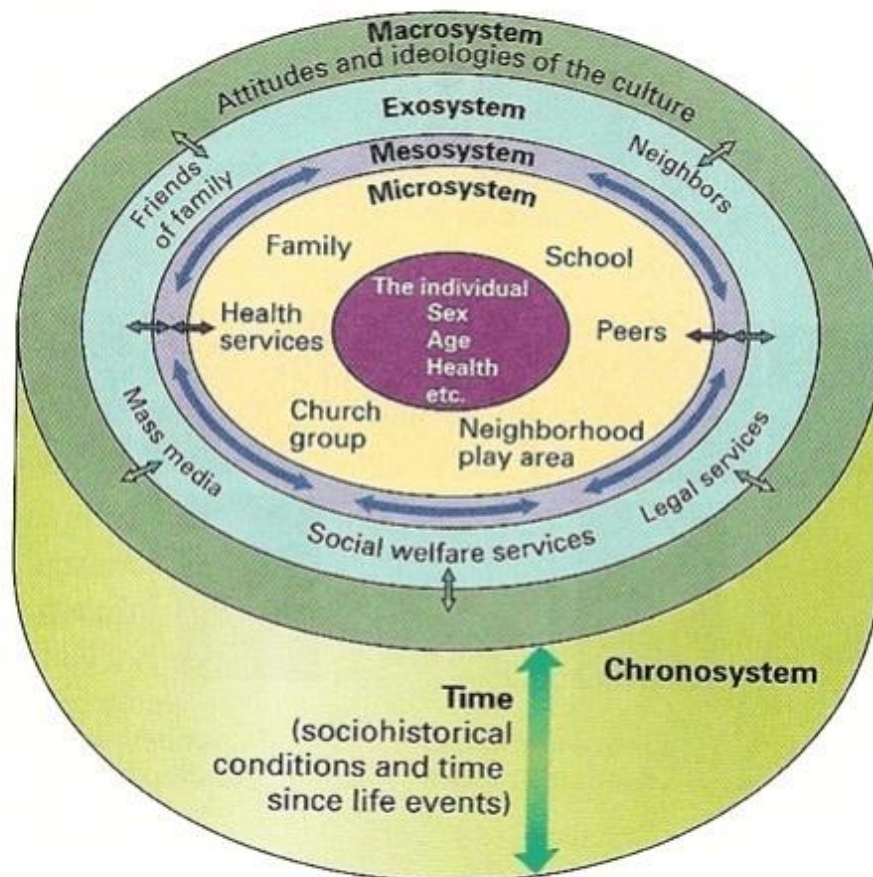


Figure 1: UrieBronfenbrenner’s bioecological systems

**Source:** <https://www.rccc.edu/sites/default/files/early-childhood-education-bronfenbrenner-circles.pdf>

The following descriptions are adapted from UrieBronfenbrenner's 1979 work:

### **Individual (Ontogenetic)**

An individual child is a biological system onto itself (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Development between systems will be impacted by biologically influenced characteristics of each respective child (Rappleyea, 2009). The interaction between factors in the child's maturing biology, his or her immediate family/community environment, and the societal landscape fuels and steers his/her development.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggests that the environment of a child is a nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next. He named these structures the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem as highlighted in the diagram.

### **Microsystem**

Donald et al. (2010) aver that the most central layer of Bronfenbrenner's model is the microsystem. The microsystem is the child's immediate environment that includes any immediate relations or organisations they interact with, such as the family, school, church, and peers. One might conclude that ASB would be learned from the sources with the greatest impact. Children learn and adopt behaviours that they are exposed to within the microsystem, especially because they have a direct influence on them. For example, if a child is nurtured in a home where domestic violence is the order of the day, the child is most likely to imitate the behaviour which may translate to behavioural disorders such as bullying at school.

### **Mesosystem**

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These refer to the relationships and intercommunications between children and their immediate settings (microsystems), for example, home and schools (Bronfenbrenner, 2005a; Rappleyea, 2009). The influences of peers at home and in school do play a role in the perpetuation of violent behaviours. If, for example, the school and the home impart to the child conflicting lessons, this may deter the child's positive social growth. For instance, if the school emphasises strict discipline whereas the home presents a laissez-faire type of parenting, then, the child is bound to get confused and in the process may lose the right path which may translate to disruptive behaviours.

### **Exosystem**

The exosystem level includes other people and places that the child may not interact with often but that still have a large effect on him or her such as parents' workplace, extended family members (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Santrock, 2010). For instance, if the mother of a child receives a promotion at work and has to travel regularly, this might compromise her parenting style. A child who grows up in such an environment may take out his/her frustrations by exhibiting aggression against other children at school.

### **Macrosystem**

According to Bronfenbrenner (2005a), the macrosystem influences the nature of interaction within all other levels. It includes social organisations, belief systems, and ideologies that underlie particular cultures and subcultures. The macrosystem also promotes societal attitudes that define social class and the opportunities and challenges associated with socioeconomic status. The evidence of the effect of this system on ASB development can be illustrated through the conceptualisation of racial tension conflicting cultural considerations between dominant and minority groups, for example, often become sources of misunderstanding. Children who

spend more time watching television than any other activity may witness violent acts in media and end up acting out the same behaviours. If a child is brought up in a culture that uses physical force as a way of maintaining discipline, then the child sees no fault in exerting the same aggression towards peers at school.

### **Chronosystem**

Bronfenbrenner (1979) asserts that development across the various contexts is likely to shift over time. The chronosystem involves the patterning of environmental events and transitions over the life course as well as the socio-historic events. For example, the death or the divorce of parents can adversely affect the proper development of children. Children may experience intense emotional disturbances at the time of the divorce often expressed as sharp feelings of anger. Cauaiola and Colford (2006) explain that the five various systems identified by Bronfenbrenner affect individual behaviour.

Thus, the theory is useful in explaining the development of ASB through the interaction of biological and environmental factors. Thus, the researchers took into account not only individual characteristics but also the multiple systems in which a child exists.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative case study was considered suitable because qualitative researchers are motivated by an in-depth inquiry to study a phenomenon in its natural setting (Knox, 2009). Yin (2013) adds that case studies are not dependent upon a large sample but can generate meaningful results with a small sample. More so, Creswell (2009) points out that those qualitative research



methods render the researcher as an active participant. This study, therefore, saw the researchers` immersing themselves in the setting within which ASB occurs.

Creswell (2009) defines a population as a well-defined collection of individuals or objects known to have similar characteristics. The population comprised primary school learners, teachers, and parents/guardians from three schools that form part of Luveve North cluster in Bulawayo's Khami district. Khami district has a total of twenty-six primary schools. Yin (2013) posits that non-probability methods of sampling are suitable for case studies. Thus, the researchers employed the purposive sampling technique. In the current study, the sample consisted of fourteen (14) primary school learners between grades five and seven. These constituted those learners who had a history of behavioural disorders. In addition, there were also six (6) teachers and six (6) parents.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from parents because they represent everyday conversation (Packer, 2011). Focus group discussions allow researchers to generate data from multiple voices (Magwa & Magwa, 2019). The present study used focus groups for learners and open-ended questionnaires for teachers.

Sullivan (2009) asserts that ethics in research relate to the principles that guide research to protect the rights of participants. The ethical issues considered in this study were informed consent, confidentiality, and no harm to participants.

For any research to generate meaningful results there should be a systematic way of presenting and analysing data. Creswell (2014) defines data analysis as the systematic search for meaning. Data analysis entails organising data in ways that allow the researcher to identify themes and relationships and thus develop explanations as well as interpretations. Creswell (2014) adds that qualitative data can be presented in several ways such as according to themes. The

emergence of themes and categories allows information to be related to the literature. In this study, the researcher analysed qualitative data using themes. Graphs, tables and pie charts were used in data presentation.

### **Findings and Discussion**

This study was undertaken to investigate the causes of antisocial behaviour among primary school learners. Through perceptions of the research participants the major causes were explored and discussed. Reference is made to available literature to validate the findings and illustrate the relationships between them.

#### **Biological factors**

Data from both teachers and parents revealed that ASB was caused by biological factors. They mentioned that the predisposition to antisocial behaviour may be inherited where some learners get angry easily and find it difficult to control their anger.

One parent had this to say:

*Some children, due to their biological makeup are easily angered and want to fight.*

*They have inherited a tendency to be antisocial from their parents and grandparents.*

The study also established microsystem factors – biological personal characteristics in older girls and boys linked to pubertal development as causal factors of ASB. Anger, anxiety, interpersonal sensitivity, irritability and aggressive behaviour are the most frequently reported symptoms of such a condition.

From the open-ended questionnaire, it emerged that during this time some girls do not tolerate provocations. The current study established that participants attributed aggressive behaviour

by some older girls to the experience of menarche or menstruation. Marceau et al. (2011:1389) found that the pubertal stage was associated with both physical and social-related aggression.

One interviewee expressed:

*If he does not get what he wants, he becomes very angry, moody. At times, one minute he is happy and the next minute he is hurling insults at others and even hitting them. You wonder what is going on with him.*

Learners with a difficult temperament as established by the study tended to easily fall prey to ASB. This finding is consistent with the bioecological theory that states that generative dispositions such as temperament characteristics can affect the child's exposure to negative life events like ASB (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006:810). Temperament is conceptualised as biologically based through interactions with environmental factors. There is a significant association between callous-unemotional traits such as lack of empathy, lack of guilt and shallow emotions, and ASB. Thus, biological factors explain classroom ASB.

### **Environmental factors**

Besides biological influences, the study also established environmental factors including parents, peers, and schools. These factors were found to be some of the main causes of ASB believed to influence the wholesome development of the child.

### **Family factors**

The current findings revealed that the family variable is one of the main environmental factors identified as a consistent variable for early forms of ASB.

### *Parenting styles*

It was established that parenting is a risk factor linked to ASB. The role of parenting in children's relationship was said to be very important in predicting ASB. Parenting practices such as yelling, nagging and threatening, lack of warmth, physical aggression, and insufficient monitoring affect the child's behaviour. Results of the study also revealed that children from homes where they are treated harshly, where there is tension and fighting between parents, are stressed and this promotes ASB.

One learner submitted:

*Once you do something wrong, you must know that you are dead. My father beats us thoroughly with a sjambok or a huge stick. Sometimes he throws things at us.*

One parent who testified to being an authoritarian parent confirmed that they beat up or slap their child to gain control over them. The parent remarked saying,

*Mina ngiyatshaya vele angidlali. Umuntu ngiyamhlaba ngempama ayewela le! Unga yekela ukutshaya bayonakala.* (I am very strict, I beat, I don't play. I slap wrong doers and send them reeling on the floor. If you spare the rod you spoil the child.)

The above findings indicate that children who are physically abused tend to experience trauma which may easily induce ASB. Research evidence confirms that physical abuse exacerbated the development of ASB. De Wet (2007) found out that parents who displayed violent and aggressive conduct in front of their children were bad role models at home as their wards would carry these experiences with them to school. Similarly, Smith and Farrington (2004) found that lack of parental involvement; parental negligence and low levels of parental involvement are strong indicators of ASB in children. A lot of evidence indicates that exposure to family or community violence can cause depression, aggression, and non-compliance behaviour in children. Thus, parental actions that do not offer love, empathy, nurturance, and information lead to children developing ASB.

*Socio-economic status*

It emerged from the study that socio-economic status, namely; parental income, level of education, and occupation is also a significant construct and indicator that influences learners' ASB. The investigation provided evidence that learners with ASB come from both poor and affluent families. Learners who experience poverty are compelled to engage in theft to meet their needs. Learners from one-parent families who often live in conditions of economic hardships are at a high risk of developing ASB.

One boy exclaimed:

*Some children don't bring any lunch boxes with food for break or lunchtime. If they ask you for food and you don't give them, they will take it by force or grab it from you and run away.*

The above findings illustrate that poverty has a debilitating effect on the behaviour of children. Prior studies support the view that low socioeconomic status is strongly associated with ASB in kids (Farrington, 2005; Gaik et al., 2010; Lee & Stockdale, 2011).

Findings from teachers revealed that watching television as well as video games influences young people to crave to be heroes and stress the need for power and control. In agreement, parents also believed that watching some television programs contributed to the development of ASB in learners. Vittrup (2009) reported that exposure to more television programs is associated with ASB at ages 7 to 12 years. There is a worldwide public health concern that watching television increases aggressive behaviours and acts of violence by children and young people (World Health Organization, 2002).

**School factors**

On the school-related factors influencing learners' ASB, the study established some of the following causes; bullying, teacher-learner relationships, peer influences, and corporal punishment.

### *Bullying*

The present study found out that bullying in the classroom or on school grounds takes the form of name-calling, teasing, intimidating, kicking, biting, and pushing leading to ASB. One learner had this to say:

*I don't like being called names. They call me Nswintila, just because I am very dark in complexion. I hate that! So I also tease others and call them names too because they laugh at me!(Nswintila refers to a black ant).*

Another learner claimed:

*Some children like to beat others a lot for no reason.*

The above statements prove that some learners may exhibit conduct disorders such as bullying because they have been victims of it. These findings corroborate the results of a study by Magwa and Ndlovu (2016) which established that school-bullying induced behavioural problems for both the perpetrators and the victims. Marais and Meir (2010) concur that there is a relationship between bullying and anti-social behaviours such as verbal and physical aggression among learners. In France, learners go to school armed because they fear their fellow learners (Hyman & Snock, 2000).

### *Teachers' negative attitudes*

The results of the study revealed that teachers' negative attitudes towards learners elicit ASB in the learners. Unsupportive and unfriendly relationships among teachers and students lead to negative behavioural outcomes for the students.

A study by Gudyanga et al. (2015) on the aetiology of students' violent behaviours in schools found out that when, for example, teachers make humiliating remarks about learners, the concerned learners would get angry and will be forced to act violently not to the teacher but to other students who make any unwelcome comments or behaviour towards the grieved learner. Harber (2004) and O'Connor et al. (2011) mention that if those in authority are violent and abusive towards children, this negative behaviour becomes normal to children and they will perpetuate this violence in their relationships with others. Smith and Sharp (2003) say in many European Union countries, racial tensions are the main causes of such violence.

#### *Ban of corporal punishment*

Another factor within the school established by the study was the ban of corporal punishment. Both teachers and parents were of the view that abolition of corporal punishment left no effective method to enforce discipline. Learners deliberately misbehave with the knowledge that they will not be physically punished.

One parent expressed:

*Now many children are misbehaving because they know that teachers are not allowed to beat them. Removal of corporal punishment has led to many children involving themselves in many crimes.*

Another parent also expressed that the abolishment of corporal punishment promoted the immoral behaviour of children. The parent in support of corporal punishment cited Proverb 23 v13-14:

*Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod he will not die.  
Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death.*

Thus, a gap in learner discipline has been created by the abolition of corporal punishment.

In a study by Chimbamu (2016) on the effects of abolishment of corporal punishment on learner behaviour in schools in Zimbabwe, 72.2 % of the participants highlighted problems like gross indiscipline, fighting, lack of respect, insubordination, bullying, stealing, bunking of lessons, and vandalism of school property. *The Sunday Mail* of 30 August 2015 in Zimbabwe, states that schools are gradually becoming breeding grounds for rowdiness following the high court ruling that outlawed corporal punishment. It was ruled by the High Court Judge in early 2015 that the practice was outlawed in terms of Sections 167 (3) and 175 (1) of the Constitution (<https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/indiscipline-soars-as-corporal-punishment-is-banned>).

### **Peer influence**

The present study findings revealed that peers' influence is a cause of ASB among learners. Results of the study also indicated that a child's association with deviant peers increases the likelihood of engaging in ASB. The child feels that if he/she does not follow the bad behaviour of peers he/she may be rejected by the group. The sentiments of the majority of the participants on the influence of peers in developing ASB are expressed in a statement by one parent who said:



*Learners with bad behaviour can encourage each other to skip classes, steal, cheat, use drugs, or become involved in risky behaviours.*

Another parent opened up and said:

*My daughter hangs around with older girls some of whom have dropped out of school. I know that they are the ones who are having a bad influence on her.*

The above findings are validated by Barber (2013) who posits that association with peers may reinforce anti-social behaviour. To corroborate this perception, Tajfel's Social Identity theory in Feldman (2009) postulates that they do so because they want to develop a sense of belonging to a group. Kleinschidt (2017) further reinforces the findings by asserting that to fit in, some children will engage in abnormal behaviours that are unacceptable according to societal standards.

### **Conclusion**

This study was an endeavour to explore the major causes that create ASB among primary school learners. Antisocial behaviours manifest in physical, verbal, and relational forms. Parenting is generally known as an important risk factor linked with antisocial behaviour. Negative child-raising parental styles, as well as low parental supervision, negatively affect the child's behaviour. Socioeconomic status is also a significant indicator of the ASB of learners. Teachers' negative attitudes towards students encourage and produce problematic behaviour in learners (Ayenibiowo & Akinbode, 2011). Positive teacher-student relationships present scaffolding for basic social and behavioural skills (Baker, 2006; O'Connor et al., 2011). The involvement of the children with their deviant peers seems to step up the growth of ASB (Kayne, 2012). Participants endorsed both biological and environmental factors as leading to the development of ASB in learners.

## Recommendations

In the light of the above causes of students' ASB, it is suggested through this study that:

- Proper early childhood development be promoted by all institutions charged with socialising children from home, church, community, and most importantly the school.
- Schools should have robust Guidance and Counselling programmes to educate learners about the dangers of engaging in ASB.
- Parents should take responsibility for the discipline of their children at home as well as becoming involved in the activities of their children and the school.

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