REVIEW

Child Abuse in the School Setting in the DRC: A Multidimensional Analysis, Psychosocial Impacts, and Pathways to Integrated Prevention

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Abstract: In recent years, the virality of videos depicting various forms of abuse in Congolese schools has exposed an alarming issue, raising questions not only about pedagogical dynamics but also the sociocultural foundations of child protection. This article offers a critical analysis of the systemic determinants of child abuse within the Congolese educational context, examining its neurocognitive, psychosocial, and economic repercussions. Drawing on an interdisciplinary literature review (encompassing pedagogy, public health, and human rights), it develops a theoretical framework for structural reforms centered on primary prevention and restorative justice.

Keywords: child abuse, school violence, sociocultural factors, educational policies

1   Introduction

Child maltreatment in school settings is a universal issue, yet its manifestations and responses vary across sociocultural and institutional contexts. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), this problem takes on urgency and contemporary relevance. In recent years, disturbing videos, widely circulated on social media, have exposed instances of both physical and psychological abuse of students by their teachers. These acts, long silenced or downplayed, have provoked legitimate reactions from local educational policymakers, child rights advocates, parent-teacher associations, and organizations working in education and human rights promotion. Above all, they have called into question local educational dynamics and the legal foundations of child protection, despite the existence of the *Law No. 09/001 of 10 January 2009 on Child Protection* and the revised *Family Code of 2016*.

This article is an expanded and revised version of a paper presented at a symposium organized by the *Forum des Intellectuels Congolais de l'Etranger* (FICE) in Brussels in November 2024, under the overarching theme: *"Inclusive Education and Respect for Children's Rights: corporal punishment, abuse or discipline in the congolese educational system?"* The present study offers a multidimensional analysis of child maltreatment in Congolese schools, examining its systemic determinants, neurocognitive and psychosocial impacts, and potential avenues for integrated prevention. While not based on primary fieldwork, this research constitutes a foundational bibliographic study, drawing on an interdisciplinary literature review (encompassing pedagogy, public health, and human rights). It highlights the mechanisms perpetuating such violence, including pedagogical authoritarianism, precarious learning conditions, and the problematic autonomy of private and faith-based schools.

Available reports paint an alarming picture: nearly 90% of children under 14 experience corporal punishment [1], while sexual and psychological violence remains vastly underreported due to cultural taboos and the lack of effective reporting mechanisms. These practices have far-reaching consequences: they impair students' cognitive and emotional development, perpetuate intergenerational cycles of violence, and hinder the country's socioeconomic progress.

Considering these findings, this article advocates for a systemic prevention approach, combining legislative reforms, teacher training in non-violent pedagogies, and community awareness-raising. By framing the discussion within the broader context of child rights and well-being in schools, this study seeks to advance the debate on inclusive education that respects learners' dignity, an essential condition for building a more just and prosperous Congolese society.

2   Conceptual framework and key issues

2.1   A major and complex public health challenge

According to the 2020 Global Status Report on Preventing Violence Against Children published by the World Health Organization (WHO), violence affects up to one billion children worldwide, with profound and enduring emotional, social, and economic repercussions [2]. A subsequent WHO report, published two years later, estimates that globally, as many as one billion children aged 2 to 17 experience physical, sexual, or emotional violence, or neglect [3]. Children subjected to abuse face heightened risks of mental health disorders, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress, as well as physical health complications, such as injuries, developmental delays, and chronic diseases. These adverse effects can persist in adulthood, leading to long-term challenges in medical care and social integration [4].

A prospective study conducted in the United States reveals that childhood exposure to violence remains a critical determinant of health outcomes even 50 years later [5], reducing life expectancy by as much as 20 years. Smith [6] further expands on the lifelong consequences of child maltreatment, demonstrating its impact across the entire life cycle, from early childhood to old age. According to Smith, abuse is also a leading cause of mortality and numerous mental and physical health disorders. As these findings illustrate, child maltreatment represents a significant public health issue due to its high prevalence and long-term consequences on the development and well-being of affected children [7].

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), reports from UNICEF paint an equally alarming picture. Nine out of ten children under the age of 14 experience "violent discipline" at the hands of caregivers entrusted with their protection [8]. Additionally, nearly 40% of sexual violence cases documented by UNICEF involve girls under 18 [9].

These statistics underscore that child maltreatment in the DRC is not merely a pressing public health concern but also a deeply complex reality, particularly in terms of reporting and victim support. Cultural norms surrounding child-rearing often place children in a position of vulnerability, where their accounts of abuse, even when perpetrated by authority figures such as teachers, are frequently dismissed by parents. This societal attitude impedes the establishment of effective mechanisms to combat and prevent maltreatment, perpetuating a cycle of violence and neglect.

2.2   A vicious cycle of violence

Child maltreatment is a complex phenomenon deeply rooted in social, educational, and familial dynamics. It embodies an intrinsic capacity to perpetuate itself across generations. Numerous studies have demonstrated a strong correlation between childhood maltreatment experiences and the likelihood of abusive behavior reproduction in adulthood. This constitutes a veritable cycle of violence, which may be theorized as intergenerational transmission. This concept posits that children subjected to physical, psychological, or sexual abuse are at a heightened risk of becoming perpetrators in adulthood [4]. This "vicious cycle" is sustained by various mechanisms, including:

(1) Learned behavioral models: Children exposed to familial violence often internalize such behaviors as normative conflict-resolution or social interaction strategies.

(2) Psychological consequences: Trauma associated with maltreatment can lead to disorders such as anxiety, depression, or attachment disorders, which influence adult behavior.

(3) Neurobiological factors: Research indicates that chronic stress linked to maltreatment may impair brain development, particularly in regions governing emotional regulation [6].

Individuals who endured maltreatment in childhood exhibit increased vulnerability to violence in adulthood. According to a Statistics Canada study, such individuals are more than twice as likely to experience intimate or non-intimate partner violence later in life [10]. Furthermore, a history of childhood maltreatment is also associated with an elevated probability of perpetrating violence as adults. Another study underscores that early exposure to violence perpetuates a cycle wherein past victims become future aggressors [11].

In France, empirical data on maltreatment reveals striking patterns, confirming the adage that "one can only give what one has received." These studies indicate that a girl subjected to psychological and sexual abuse in childhood is 19 times more likely to experience similar violence later, while a boy exposed to psychological and physical maltreatment is 16 times more prone to inflicting comparable harm as an adult [12]. Widom and colleagues found that

individuals with a history of childhood abuse face a fourfold increased risk of engaging in intimate partner violence or maltreating their own children [13]. Herrenkohl et al. report that nearly 30% of adults who suffered childhood maltreatment replicate this pattern with their offspring [14].

A UNICEF report provides compelling evidence of this cyclical phenomenon, demonstrating that perpetrators of violence are more likely to have experienced it themselves during childhood [15]. Additional studies, including those conducted in SADC countries, reveal that young women exposed to childhood violence face significantly higher risks of intimate partner violence. For instance, research in rural South African communities found that both men and women who endured physical and/or sexual abuse as children were far more susceptible to non-partner sexual violence in adulthood [16]. This suggests that the probability of experiencing or perpetrating violence in adulthood or within relationships is, to a considerable extent, rooted in childhood maltreatment.

2.3   An impediment to socioeconomic development

Child maltreatment, in all its forms, has profound consequences for children's development and, by extension, a nation's socioeconomic progress. On an individual level, abused children often suffer physical trauma (e.g., bodily injuries) and psychological disorders, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress. These experiences disrupt brain development, potentially leading to cognitive impairments that hinder academic performance and social skills. The WHO 2024 [17] asserts:

> *"Maltreatment induces stress linked to disruptions in early brain development. Extreme stress can impair nervous and immune system development. Consequently, abused children face heightened risks of behavioral, physical, and mental health issues in adulthood, such as violent perpetration or victimization, depression, smoking, obesity, risky sexual behavior, unintended pregnancies, and substance abuse".* These afflictions incapacitate victims, severely undermining their ontological capacity to function as active and productive citizens.

On a macroeconomic level, adults with a history of childhood maltreatment exhibit elevated risks of high-risk behaviors, including substance abuse and mental health disorders. In countries where youth under 25 constitute nearly 70% of the population [18], this malaise erodes a critical segment of the workforce, pushing many toward vagrancy and delinquency, rendering them a drain rather than an asset to national development. Moreover, the healthcare costs, social services, and productivity losses attributable to child maltreatment impose a significant economic burden. Delinquent youth often face educational exclusion, limiting future employment prospects and perpetuating cycles of poverty and underdevelopment. The associated violence fosters insecurity, deterring investment and stifling economic growth.

The *Kuluna* phenomenon, organized juvenile delinquency involving armed gangs and highway robberies. It boosts this reality in the nation's urban centers. As Molo aptly notes: *"Youth comprise a substantial demographic, yet they confront immense challenges, illiteracy, corruption, juvenile delinquency, and moral decay"* [19]. These anti-values only serve to further underdevelop the country.

3   Conceptual approach to child maltreatment

Derived from the verb *maltraiter* (to mistreat), the term *maltraitance* (maltreatment) refers to harmful or abusive treatment inflicted upon an individual. According to Tursz [20], it encompasses "any act, whether through commission or omission, by a parent or caregiver that results in harm, potential harm, or the threat of harm to a child, regardless of intent." Article 19 of the *International Convention on the Rights of the Child* (November 20, 1989) defines child maltreatment as encompassing "all forms of physical or mental violence, injury, or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment, or exploitation, including sexual violence." The World Health Organization [17] describes child maltreatment as acts of violence or neglect perpetrated against individuals under the age of 18, covering all forms of physical and/or emotional abuse, sexual violence, neglect, negligent treatment, or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development, or dignity within a relationship of responsibility, trust, or power. Similarly, the *Observatoire Décentralisé de l'Action Sociale* (ODAS) defines a maltreated child as one who is "a victim of physical violence, mental cruelty, sexual abuse, or severe neglect with significant consequences on their physical and psychological development." Since 1993, this organization has also referred to *children at*

risk, encompassing both maltreated children and those whose living conditions jeopardize their health, safety, morality, education, or upbringing, even if they are not yet subject to overt abuse.

Child maltreatment thus comprises all behaviors and practices that undermine a child's dignity, safety, and well-being, including physical, verbal, psychological, sexual, and economic violence, as well as digital abuse. The *European Convention on Human Rights* (October 2, 2013) categorizes such acts as "inhuman or degrading treatment."

In an educational setting, maltreatment refers to any intentional or unintentional behavior or act that inflicts physical, emotional, or psychological harm on a student. It may manifest physical, psychological, or verbal violence, as well as neglect. *Ordinary Educational Violence* (Violences Educative Ordinaires, VEO) includes acts such as corporal punishment (spanking, slapping), shouting, humiliation, mockery, threats, or deprivation. These acts may be perpetrated by various school actors, including principals, teachers, classmates, security personnel, or other educational staff.

4   Typology of maltreatment in school settings

The concept of child maltreatment has evolved historically. Initially centered on overt physical abuse, it now includes emotional abuse, neglect, and psychological violence. The literature distinguishes several types of maltreatment:

(1) Physical maltreatment: A range of practices, including corporal punishment (still widespread as a disciplinary method), such as hitting, slapping, pinching cheeks, pulling ears, whipping, forced manual labor, punitive physical exercises, or any form of physical aggression inflicted upon a student. Despite condemnation by international organizations, these practices remain prevalent in many schools.

(2) Psychological and verbal maltreatment: These forms of abuse profoundly affect students' mental health, undermining their self-esteem and motivation to learn. They include humiliation, mockery, threats, marginalization, insults, and defamation.

(3) Sexual abuse, often perpetrated by teachers or older students, constitutes a disturbing reality. This form of maltreatment affects a significant proportion of students, particularly girls, and includes sexual assault, harassment, and any non-consensual or inappropriate sexual contact within the school environment. Victims are frequently silenced due to fear of retaliation or societal taboos, especially in Congolese society.

(4) Neglect: The failure to provide adequate care or supervision, including abstaining from responsibilities toward children. Examples include failing to intervene in bullying, ignoring unsafe school environments, or neglecting educational duties.

(5) Online violence (particularly in urban settings): With increasing internet access in schools, abuses such as cyberbullying and non-consensual dissemination of intimate images have been reported.

It is evident that these various forms of maltreatment have profound and lasting repercussions on a child's life. Psychologically, victims may develop anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and sleep disorders. Physically, they may exhibit psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, chronic fatigue, and eating disorders. Behaviorally, maltreated children are more likely to display aggression, social withdrawal, or addiction-related issues. Academically, maltreatment can lead to learning difficulties, diminished concentration, frequent absenteeism, and, in some cases, school dropouts.

5   Explanatory factors

Several factors appear, in many respects, to legitimize the mistreatment of children in Congolese schools. The first factor stems from the paternalistic and authoritarian figure of the adult, which pervades African and Congolese social structures and extends into the educational sphere. The teacher is the undisputed authority in the classroom, deemed infallible in both speech and action. Students owe them unconditional respect and absolute obedience. Pedagogically, the teacher alone designs, plans, structures, and imparts knowledge. They orchestrate the learning environment, determining its modalities through a communication style that is often impersonal and strictly hierarchical. This reflects a *"teacher-centered"* pedagogical approach, wherein the educator serves as the sole interpreter of *"Tradition"* and the exclusive custodian of knowledge, transmitting it to a passive mass of learners whose only duty is to receive it [21].

Regrettably, this traditional pedagogical approach remains prevalent in primary education in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The teacher functions as the primary, if not the sole,

conduit of knowledge, wielding discretionary power to unilaterally decide a student's promotion to the next grade. Unsurprisingly, these dynamic fosters a *"perpetrator-victim"* relationship between teacher and student, paving the way for a culture of mistreatment by the former toward the latter. Alongside the teacher's paternalistic authoritarianism, older students in the class or school also exert dominance over their younger peers, subjecting them to abuse.

The second factor is the school or pedagogical environment. While educational settings are meant to be spaces for learning and socialization, they can unfortunately become arenas for various forms of mistreatment. These may include peer bullying, abuses of power by educational staff, or institutional neglect of children's specific needs [22]. This is particularly evident in overcrowded classrooms, a common phenomenon in DRC primary schools. These learning spaces are often packed to capacity, with students squeezed together, seated four or five to a bench (or even on the floor), some straining to take notes on their laps. Class sizes typically range between 70 and 120 pupils. Poor lighting, noise, cramped spaces, uncomfortable seating, and prolonged immobility characterize these overcrowded classrooms, creating conditions ripe for peer maltreatment. Chatter, distractions, and student restlessness undermine classroom discipline, compelling teachers to resort to punitive measures, often arbitrary and disproportionate, to assert authority. These include expulsion from class, manual labor, grade deductions, or suspensions, all of which constitute forms of child maltreatment.

Neurophysiological studies indicate that unfavorable learning environments, such as overcrowded classrooms, trigger the secretion of stress hormones like cortisol, adrenaline, and noradrenaline [23]. These hormones fuel emotional responses such as anger, anxiety, stress, and discouragement, which severely hinder a child's personal development, well-being, and academic success.

The third factor pertains to inclusion in educational settings. Schools are inherently diverse and heterogeneous spaces, yet the failure to manage this diversity inclusively, particularly for children with specific learning needs, can heighten the risk of maltreatment. Children perceived as *"different"* due to their social background, religion, physical stature, age, or intellectual ability are more vulnerable to bullying. Physical appearance, disabilities (whether physical or cognitive), and socioeconomic disadvantage frequently make children targets of mockery, harassment, or stigmatization. Those from impoverished families are especially susceptible to humiliation and abuse [24].

The fourth factor, more structural in nature, is the organizational autonomy of private and faith-based schools. While maltreatment in education has been widely documented in public institutions, it is increasingly prevalent in private and religious schools, where unique structural and cultural dynamics exacerbate risks. These institutions often operate with greater regulatory independence and limited state oversight, creating environments conducive to coercive practices, both physical and psychological [25].

Recent research highlights how hierarchical power structures, compounded by a culture of silence rooted in religious dogma, obstruct the reporting of abuse. UNICEF [1, 26] reveals that 28% of students in religious-oriented private schools in certain developing countries report systematic corporal punishment, compared to 19% in public schools. Moreover, an emphasis on discipline and obedience, often justified by moral or theological tenets, normalizes subtler forms of violence, such as humiliation or emotional neglect [27].

The absence of standardized reporting protocols and limited awareness of children's rights among educators further aggravate the issue. Yet the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and WHO guidelines [3] call for stricter supervision of these institutions. Multidisciplinary interventions, including teacher training and engagement with religious communities, are recommended to curb these practices [28].

Numerous additional factors corroborate the reality of school-based maltreatment, including gender inequality, discrimination against women, male domination in households and society, inadequate teacher training in conflict resolution and child-centered pedagogy, lack of civic education, weak institutions, and a culture of impunity, to name but a few.

6   Conclusion

Child maltreatment in schools within the Democratic Republic of the Congo emerges as a complex issue, deeply rooted in sociocultural, pedagogical, and institutional determinants. The manifestations of such violence, whether physical, psychological, sexual, or neglectful, extend beyond the confines of the educational setting, yielding enduring neurocognitive, psy-

chosocial, and economic repercussions. Empirical data and institutional reports converge on an alarming observation: far from being a mere disciplinary dysfunction, this abuse perpetuates an intergenerational cycle of violence, undermining both individual and collective development.

The explanatory factors are manifold, ranging from authoritarian pedagogical models and substandard learning conditions (overcrowded classrooms, inadequate environments) to the excessive autonomy of private and faith-based schools, which often lack effective oversight mechanisms. These dynamics sustain a culture of coercion in which educational violence is normalized, even legitimized, by prevailing social and religious norms.

Confronted with this reality, a systemic and integrated approach is imperative. Reforms must combine legislative strengthening, training for educators in non-violent pedagogies, and community awareness-raising on children's rights. Primary prevention, coupled with restorative justice mechanisms, could disrupt the cycle of violence while fostering a school climate conducive to student well-being.

An inclusive educational reform, centered on the promotion of children's rights and the eradication of all forms of corporal punishment, should be considered. Such reform could entail:

(1) The establishment, within schools, of abuse reporting mechanisms in collaboration with parent-teacher associations, psychological support services for victimized students, and initiatives promoting non-violent education;

(2) Community sensitization to dismantle taboos surrounding maltreatment and encourage reporting;

(3) The integration into secondary curricula, teacher training institutes, and university programs in psychology and educational sciences of modules on cognitive, affective, and social neuroscience;

(4) The incorporation into in-service teacher training of courses on non-violent classroom management, children's rights, and the social role of schools;

(5) The promotion of civic and citizenship education to instill democratic values in students, heighten their awareness of abuse, and embolden them to report such acts;

(6) State-led reinforcement of oversight mechanisms across all educational sectors, alongside legislative and judicial frameworks ensuring exemplary sanctions for perpetrators of child maltreatment;

(7) Sensitization of healthcare professionals to look beyond physical and visible signs during clinical consultations with school-aged children.

Ultimately, Congolese schools must become sanctuaries of knowledge and personal growth. As underscored by the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, *"every child has the right to be protected from all forms of violence, abuse, and brutality."* Upholding this right is not merely a moral obligation, it is an indispensable prerequisite for building a more just, prosperous, and forward-looking society. The fight against school-based maltreatment thus transcends educational imperatives: it is a civilizational challenge and the very foundation of sustainable socioeconomic development.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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