



# Graffiti and Discursive Legitimacy: The Politics of Spatiality and Agency in Teachers' Attitudes Towards Student Graffiti in Zimbabwean High Schools

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**Abstract:** The article explores how issues of spatiality and agency are implicated in the construction of teachers' attitudes on the occurrence of graffiti within the Zimbabwe school system. Graffiti is an important third space in the education system that is, however, negatively conceptualised by both the teaching staff and school authorities, alike. Teachers are a crucial cog in the total education process who have the mandate to determine the range of spaces on which 'legitimate' discursing and learning can take place. Teachers' attitudes on the presence of graffiti on the school premises are mainly shaped by their perception of (1) the toilet as a discursive space and (2) the nature of the graffiti writers who are mainly perceived as (i) hailing from the ghetto (ii) intellectually and mentally challenged. Data was collected from interviews held with high school teachers in Gweru district. Analysis of the data is couched in Deetz' theorisation of discursive closure. Analysis of the graffiti texts reveals that, in spite of its many positive contributions to educational institutions, teachers mainly attribute the presence of graffiti in the school to 'slow learners', students who come from the ghetto and single/absent parent backgrounds. This is further compounded by its main association with the toilet, which is a space that no 'sane' student is supposed to interact on.

**Keywords:** Graffiti, Discursive Legitimacy, Spatiality, Agency, Teachers' Attitudes

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## 1. Introduction

The school is an institution that offers students with a plethora of spaces for interaction. These include the classroom, clubs, during sporting activities and their own private playtime, among others. However, questions are raised on the academic value of these respective interactions, and discourses constructed therein, in relation to their perceived worthiness in the students' overall educational experience in the school. Of significance is how particular social groups attach different levels of value to these different types of discourses depending on their socially-constructed attitudes. The study specifically focuses on discourses constructed by students though toilet graffiti. It does not however focus on the content of the graffiti itself. Rather, it explores how the content of the graffiti is generally received by teachers. Also referred to as *loco parentis*, teachers are an important cog of the students' socialisation within the school as they are generally

influential in instilling both academic and moral knowledge. Their attitudes with regards to the occurrence of graffiti within the school, its content and writers, is therefore crucial in determining its discursive legitimacy or value in education institutions. Attention is placed on how teachers' attitudes towards student graffiti are constructed along geo-political lines implicated in perpetuating narratives revolving around issues of the spatiality and agency. These are, in turn, then implicated in a discursive closure processes that effectively condemns student graffiti within the school system as a worthless discourse. The study exposes a common discursive 'fact' in so far as discursive capital is concerned. That is, within the school set up, not all the students and expressive spaces have the same expressive power.

Graffiti is a medium which can potentially start significant conversations that can develop society [22]. Students in Zimbabwe have used graffiti as a space to raise pertinent issues that impact on their lives at school, at home and in the

community in general [19, 20, 29]. However, graffiti is still perceived as a unique form of a 'social problem' within the Zimbabwean urban school system. These perceptions shape the treatment of graffiti by school authorities. The role of attitudes in the conceptualisation of graffiti as a social problem within the Zimbabwean school system cannot be overemphasised. The study, therefore, explores the specific ways in which the presence of graffiti in the school system is collectively defined by teachers as a social problem; how it is implicated in the politics of spatiality and agency. Spatiality is defined as a social construct, not an exogenously given, absolute coordinate system ... Spatiality is constitutive of the particular ways in which the different modalities of power take effect (<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100521647>).

In this study, focus is placed on (1) how spaces on which the graffiti is inscribed and (2) where perceived writers of graffiti are perceived as living within the urban area. These factors are then used by teachers to make value judgements of both its content and its writers. Suffice to point out that within the Zimbabwean school system, graffiti is synonymous with the toilet. Agency relates to the nature of the writer. That is, their 'identity' in terms of their intellectual capabilities and cultural capital, among others. The study interrogates how, in so far as teachers' attitudes are concerned, the interplay between spatiality and agency contributes to the overall marginalisation and/or dismissal of graffiti in Zimbabwean high schools. The study subscribes to the view that speaking/writing does not necessarily translate to communication.

Teachers' attitudes represent their psycho-social response to student graffiti. It involves the assigning into categories of people and spaces 'typically' involved in graffiti writing in schools. These categories then determine the seriousness with which issues raised in the graffiti are treated by the school authorities. These attitudes are important in that they may be crucial in the shaping and enforcing of policies and regulations that relate to the presence of graffiti in schools. Attitudes provide teachers with a specific framework of engaging student graffiti. They shape narratives which then inform the school's response to the presence of graffiti. Attitudes are seldom arbitrary or neutral. They usually emanate from definite social-cultural processes embedded within a specific social milieu. It is, therefore, imperative to deconstruct the psycho-social foundation on which teachers' responses to student graffiti are predicated.

The attitudes are also central to a discursive (de)legitimation process that ultimately defines the value of graffiti within the school. They shape the extent to which value positions raised in graffiti by the students are entertained. That is, whether the school is to consider toilet graffiti as a 'legitimate' source of actionable information that can positively contribute to the students' total education experience.

Education can be characterised as media production [11]. Traditionally, it involves the transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the student, and vice versa, within the space

offered by the physical classroom. However, there is need to appreciate the existence of a multiplicity of alternative spaces for epistemological transfer available within the school, especially in relation to an education that is sensitive to the students' socio-cultural backgrounds [31]. They focus on the internet as a learning space that can widen the epistemological lens of the education system in New Zealand. The same concept can be extended to the Zimbabwean school system in order to investigate the existence of epistemological plurality. Spaces where learning also occurs include the playground, interactive clubs as well as the toilet wall. There is significant cultural learning taking place through toilet graffiti [20].

Students constitute a minority group from a discursive capital perspective [23]. They don't have many channels through which they can articulate their views, especially through established/conventional media. Thus, graffiti is hereby regarded as a third discursive space (after the classroom and formal clubs at school) where students can freely express themselves. The term backstage discourse refers to the equalising effect of the third spaces in balancing linguistic or communicative power [17, 15]. Marginalised groups with limited discursive capital may resort to graffiti by appropriating toilet walls into a discursive space. Graffiti then becomes an intrinsic part of discourses that circulate in educational institutions.

Legitimacy can be defined from a collective perspective whereby it refers to the social acceptance through which something becomes taken-for-granted [18, 26]. It provides a framework with which to judge the value of phenomena by a group of people. Thus, legitimacy relates to entities and actions that are considered proper, appropriate and desirable within a constructed, taken-for-granted system of shared beliefs, values and norms [26]. As such, discursive legitimacy stresses some model of appropriateness as a basis for judging the value of phenomena [11]. Discursive legitimacy pertains to the extent to which the discourse of a particular social group is judged as appropriate. Thus, it is used to explore teachers' attitudes determine the value of graffiti as a legitimate/appropriate discourse. Focus is placed on the sort of interpretive frames that shape these perceptions and, consequently, how they, in turn, shape power relations within the school system.

Of space, place and graffiti writing within the school.

References [5, 6] offers a space-place distinction that is crucial to the present study. He defines space as a prerequisite or forerunner of place. That is, space only becomes place when people, as social actors, invest meaning in it and then get attached to it in some way. This suggests some kind of connection between particular social groups and their physical environment, which is the school in this case. The notion of place inherently implies "a sense of the proper" where someone, or something, necessarily belongs in one place and not in another [6]. Crucial to appreciate is how this sense of belonging is in fact socially/discursively constructed. There is nothing logical, legal or ethical that defines who does or does not belong to a particular place.

Instead, “they are expectations about behaviour that relate a position in a social structure to actions in space” [6]. To the extent that these expectations serve the interests of those at the top of social hierarchies, they can then be described as ideological. He argues that, “expectations about behaviour in place are important components in the construction, maintenance, and evolution of ideological values” [6]. The built environment (the school in this case) is inherently endowed with connotative meanings that in turn impact on people's identity [13]. The toilet is for instance an apolitical discursive space. It only becomes politically inflected the moment students inscribe on its various surfaces. Thus, student graffiti transforms what is perceived by teachers as a discursively neutral space to a discursive place. As such, a distillation of teachers' attitudes towards student graffiti enables an interpretation of the connection between teachers' common-sense assumptions about the toilet as a discursive place and normative judgments of students' behaviour and how these enmesh resulting in the discursive closure of student graffiti in schools.

The framing of attitudes towards graffiti is a fashioning of an interpretive paradigm that serves as the background of the social practice [4]. This process implicates the writing surface, the writers themselves as well as its content. As such, she defines the context of graffiti on number of levels which include the linguistic, locality, surface and discourse. These enable the interrogation of wider urban factors and local nuances impacting on the social practice. Of particular interest to the present study is how a reading of graffiti necessarily factors in the total physical and sociocultural environs in which it is emersed. For instance, from a surface perspective, the walls on which graffiti is written invites a different form treatment according to the respective city in which they occur. This therefore highlights the political nature of the social formation of attitudes towards the practice itself. Thus, from a discourse perspective, it becomes imperative to explore how discourses on graffiti revolve around various urban identities.

Graffiti writing is inexorably linked with notions of territorology from both the writers' and authority's perspectives [2]. He defines territorology as "the science of such territorial formations, includes a study of the boundary-making activities that draw territories and aims to understand the consequences of the existence of wholly social territories" [2]. In the context of the present research, this presupposes the existence of formally-set boundaries by the school (in terms normative uses of the toilet and conventional spaces for discoursing), and associated inherent issues conformity and transgression. Thus, the students' mere act of writing on the toilet walls then brings into play issues relating to the conceptualisation of governmentality where power is exercised is very parameterised ways in each and very institution [12]. It is therefore critical to investigate how teacher's attitudes on students' toilet graffiti is implicated in the conformity-transgression politics that ultimately results in the discursive closure of issues engaged therein.

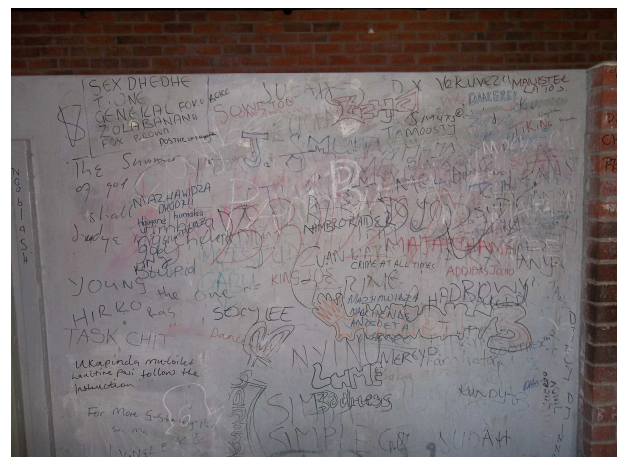
## 2. Methods

Data for analysis was collected from interviews held by the researcher with twenty-four (24) high school teachers in Gweru District, Midlands Province, Zimbabwe. Gweru District has ten high schools. These exclude privately-run colleges. The public schools were categorised into three strata based on their geographical location in the city. This location was predominantly based on population density of the residential areas in which they are located. This resulted in a population characterised on three strata; that is, low density, high density and central business district (CBD). From these, a process of stratified random sampling was employed where three schools from the high-density areas, two schools from the CBD and one school from the low-density suburbs were selected. From each school, four members of the teaching staff were randomly selected for the interview sessions.

## Theoretical framework

Analysis of data is informed by Reference's [9] discursive closure. It postulates that the total communicative process is impinged upon by discursive behaviours and practices that undermine, consciously or otherwise, another groups value positions. Discursive closure is subtle way of marginalising without giving the appearance of doing so. It entails privileging particular discourses whilst marginalising others. It involves seemingly innocent strategies used powerful groups to suppress potential conflict and prevent alternative views from being freely expressed. These include: disqualification, naturalization, neutralization, topical avoidance, subjectification of experience, meaning denial and plausible deniability, legitimation, and pacification. The school epitomises institutions where multiple discourses compete for legitimacy. However, only specific kinds of discourses are privileged. Teachers can be taken as gatekeepers of a rigid kind of discourse and their attitudes towards student graffiti, therefore, are crucial in the marginalisation of competing discourses raised through it.

### 3. Discussion



**Figure 1.** Graffiti inscribed on students' toilet walls.

## A visit to the typical toilet in Zimbabwean schools reveals

that there is much more going on in there than the 'normal' physiological relief and freshen up, amongst other otherwise mundane processes. For instance, a look at the various toilet surfaces reveals varying degrees of inscriptions by the students. A close analysis of the inscriptions reveals that the students are actually actively engaged in various issues impacting on their lives. Graffiti constitutes sociocultural literacies that essentially compliments the formal school curriculum in so far as behavioural change is concerned [19, 20]. Figures 1 and 2 below show the sheer volume of the inscriptions on the surfaces.



**Figure 2.** Graffiti inscribed on a toilet stall door.

Figures 1 and 2 present graffiti typically inscribed on toilet walls and doors, respectively. Figure 1, in particular, shows the 'economy' of graffiti in so far as its maximisation of available writing surface is concerned. Every inch of the wall available for writing has been utilised, a feat necessarily involving making efforts to write on otherwise difficult to reach top of the wall surface. Without necessarily getting into the content of the graffiti inscriptions themselves, the images show that students are appropriating the toilet surface as a space on which to actively engage in a plethora of issues impacting on their lives. Importantly, it shows that the students have something to say. The question, however, is whether the school authorities consider graffiti as worthy of their attention. If not, the reasons for the discursive closure. It, thus, calls for an investigation of the degree to which teachers, for instance, regard student.

Interviews conducted with teachers from various schools in Gweru district revealed a multiplicity of attitudes in so far as their response to graffiti in the school. These revolves around spatiality and agency issues. Significantly, the data reveals both positive and negative attitudes.

#### *Positive sentiments towards graffiti*

##### *A free space for self-expression*

A combination of sociocultural factors has resulted in a situation whereby the students are not really 'free' to approach the system so that they can discuss issues that concern them. The school, more so in an African setting where there is a general deferment to adults, in general, and teachers, in particular, is an environment characterised by

unequal relations between the teaching staff (the adults) and the students (children). Operating in a paternalistic and patronising environment where the teacher is taken to know best, interaction between the two parties becomes characteristically skewed in favour of the teaching staff. The students are therefore left in need of spaces within which they can discourse away from this position of disadvantage. This is a sentiment that is highlighted in propositions (1) to (3) below:

The students do not have the platform to express themselves.

They find the toilet as a free environment

Students feel it is the only way they are free to express themselves.

Image 1 underscores the extent to which students freely express themselves on toilet surfaces. Whilst the aspect of 'freedom' is implied in (1), it is explicitly stated in (2) and (3). (1) acknowledges the power of the discursive space provided by the toilet to enable the students to explore or deal with issues in a manner otherwise impossible in other media. (2) and (3) highlight the importance of the environment in so far as student self-expression is concerned. It is not just a simple matter of saying out what you have to say. What is said depends on the discursive environment. In cases where the school offers other means for free self-expression they are generally skewed to the school's advantage. Proposition (4) cites how:

Some schools have introduced suggestion boxes but even so, given the administration is in control of the students' grievances and it [the administration] is against it, they destroy and thwart them heedlessly.

Response (4) emphasises a situation in which it is ultimately the teaching and administrative staff who have the power to determine the degree of seriousness of whatever issues are raised via such anonymous avenues by the students. This is in spite of the fact that student graffiti is not exclusively concerned with complaints and suggestions. It however underscores the general difficulty of student self-expression within the school system.

The sentiments emerging from (1) to (4) emphasise how interaction should not be perceived just as a matter of two or more people engaged in interaction. The nature and overall success of the interaction is to be considered from a power and power semantics perspective. Power semantics inform us that it is the senior partner in any given interactive situation that has the privilege, if not prerogative, to determine its topic, direction, duration and seriousness, among others. Students, as the junior or lesser interactive partners, are therefore left in a position where they cannot really influence interaction between the two parties.

##### *Exposure of student abuses by teachers*

Whilst the above sentiments in (1) to (4) do not specify the nature of the problem(s) affecting the student which they would then need to freely express themselves, responses from the interviews narrow the problems down to issues related to various forms of abuse both within and outside the school. These are presented as (5) to (10), below:



Graffiti exposes hidden issues like abuse of learners by teachers.

To prevent the occurrence of issues such as beatings and unnecessary scolding by teachers.

A form of protest against certain things at school. It can be seen as a result of abuse. The students might have been abused by others or by teachers. They might be against certain rules at school and/or they might be trying to get their views heard by school authorities.

Emotionally and mentally abused learners use graffiti as a way of exposing those that bully them, be it parents, relatives, teachers and peers.

Well I used to do it because I had horrible parents and I couldn't tell them. My mom was an alcoholic.

A way of students showing their disgruntlement against the school.

The responses highlight the centrality of teachers in the perpetration of abuse on students. Whilst (5) is general in that it does not specify the nature of the abuse, (6) and (8) identify it as physical (beatings) and emotional (unnecessary scolding). In fact, this constitutes student emotional abuse through the systematic psychological tearing down of another human being which includes the belittling of a pupil, use of vulgar language, humiliation, negative labelling, and terrorisation of pupils by teachers [27, 1] characterise. (7) – (9) widen the perpetrators to also include peers, parents and relatives. (10) serves to highlight how abuse may be systemic/institutional, rather than by individual teachers per se. Rules and practices in the school can be abusive, thereby typifying 'the many ways in which the school hierarchy silences' the students' voices [28]. Of major interest is how the responses confirm the conventional position that perpetrators of abuse are most likely to be someone who is close to the child, thereby making it difficult for them to report the crimes due to a fear of victimisation by perpetrators and social stigma. Graffiti is therefore construed by the teachers as a space that is critical in empowering students to speak out.

Responses (1) – (10) underscore the discursive importance of backstage discourses or the third space. Particular population groups lack linguistic capital in specific contexts [23, 15]. Third spaces redress discursive imbalances. Students don't have a lot of conventional spaces for articulating their views [23]. Thus, graffiti is the third space where students can express themselves. Marginalised groups who lack the opportunity to have their opinions resort graffiti [15]. The toilet is much more than a space for physiological relief. It also provides a 'backstage pass' for marginalised voices where they otherwise excluded from conventional discursive spaces [16]. Thus, discursive appropriation of the toilet wall demonstrates the ubiquitous nature of power.

#### *Negative attitudes towards graffiti and its writers*

In spite of the acknowledgement of the positive value of graffiti raised by the teachers in the responses above, the general sentiments were however that these positives are very much outweighed by the negatives. Negative sentiments revolve around the nature of the discourse used in graffiti

itself, its writers and spatiality issues.

#### *A vulgar discourse*

Most of the teaching staff characterised graffiti as a vulgar discourse. Vulgarity (referred to as *zvinyadzi* in Shona) is an important indicator of morality in African culture. The Shona have a proverb which declares that *nyandzi dzokunda rufu* (shame is worse than death). One is not expected to volitionally participate in activities that bring shame to either themselves, the community or both. The teachers' responses indicated vulgarity is the main driver of graffiti. This is presented by (11) and (12) below:

*Zvingori zvinyadzi zvega. Hazvina direction.*

(It's just vulgar. It has no direction)

*Morality hapachina. Zvavanonyora zvonyadzisa. Ndozvavonopindira mutoilet.*

(There is no more morality. They write vulgar. It's why they go into the toilet).

Responses (11) and (12) are significant in that they base their dismissal of graffiti on the basis of one of its characteristics – the use of vulgar language. The inscription of the word *mhata* (asshole/vagina) in Image 2 is a case in point. There is no attempt to establish both the extensiveness and/or discursive function of the vulgar language. It is just collectively labelled as lacking direction. For (12), the writing of vulgarities is the sole reason students enter the toilet. Its characterisation as a vulgar discourse emanates from the general proliferation of vulgar words as well as sex-related drawing. This is then used to characterise graffiti as a discourse lacking direction, that is, with no social import. This represents a classic case of exemplification whereby the presence of vulgar language is then used as the basis for its blanket dismissal as a serious/legitimate discourse. The result is the graffiti is delegitimised on the basis that its major preoccupation is solely the writing of vulgarities. That is, it has no real or immediate utility to both the writer and the school.

The perceived proliferation of vulgarities is then used as the basis for evaluating graffiti from a moral standpoint. Morality (*unhu/ubuntu*) is a complex and political issue that determines a person's worth in society. Perceived moral upstanding determines privilege/inclusion and exclusion/alienation. In this particular situation, graffiti is evaluated from a morality perspective. Its perceived immorality is then used as the basis on which it is dismissed as a legitimate discourse within the school system. The term moralization to capture how moral arguments are used to establish the legitimacy and illegitimacy of social phenomena [30].

#### *Writers' intellectual capacity and mental disposition*

The school is an institution which celebrates intellectual and academic achievements. Sometimes they two are conflated into one. Interview responses reveal how the presence of graffiti in the school system is attributed to specific intellectual segments of the student population.

Graffiti is written by those of low IQ.

It is mostly written by children who are not good in class. Those who excel don't partake in those activities.

*Vanonetseka nechikoro [ndovanonyora madziro]. Vanonetseka nechikoro vane musikanzwa.* The intelligent are well-behaved.

(Those who struggle in school [are the ones who write graffiti]. They are delinquent.

Slow learners and remedial students.

Writers are below average in class. [Their] highest mark is [between] 20-30%.

The school overtly labels students based on their academic achievement (which is equated to intellectual capacity). Going by various otherwise innocent-sounding terms such as 'screening', 'streaming' and 'ability tracking', intellectual capacity is a crucial identity maker and/or marker.

Ability streaming is essentially a social stratification tool which ultimately privileges high ability learners [21]. On the one hand, the 'best students' are normally privileged in a variety of ways. These include, getting the best teachers, more learning time, the most 'difficult' subjects and generally more learning resources [21]. On the other hand, lower ability learners are labelled as dull, they receive low level instruction and they are allocated low and poor resources. In this intellectual apartheid, there is a tendency to correlate intellectual ability and students' propensity to get entangled in deviancy/delinquency. High achievers are considered 'serious' students who do not engage in mischief. It, therefore, unsurprising that graffiti is attributed to 'slow learners'.

It becomes interesting that in responses (13) to (17), there is a deliberate use of euphemisms which refer to students' intellectual ability. These include 'not good in class', '*vanonetseka nechikoro*' (those that struggle with school/those that find school difficult – as if to acknowledge their valiant, but futile, efforts), 'slow learners' 'remedial students' and 'below average students'. (16) makes it explicit that strugglers are the delinquent ones since the "intelligent are well-behaved". This presupposes a standard the students are evaluated against. 'Slow' entails the speed at which the learning or grasping of concepts proceeds. Below average assumes a threshold below which students are not expected to fall. In spite of the conscious delicacy the insinuation that graffiti is dull-students' discourse is not lost. On that basis, it is characterised as a brainless and not serious and must, of necessity, be ignored, at best, or, erased.

The foregoing invokes notions of intellectual capital within the school. Intellectual capital pertains to knowledge as an intangible asset perceived from the viewpoint of behaviour regulation and a predictor of wealth creation. It is knowledge that can make a school function properly/efficiently [10]. There is a general tendency to favour high achievers. It is little wonder why in those cases where graffiti is actually linked to a high achiever there is a tendency to first rationalise it to an external factor. This emerges below:

*Vamwe vanogona. Hameno kuti chi chinenge chaitika mubrain mavo* (Some are intelligent. I don't know what would have affected their brain/mind.

The response reveals exasperation at intellectually gifted

students who engage in graffiti writing. It shows denial of the possibility of intellectually gifted students writing graffiti. Their involvement is then rationalised on something having affected their brain. The reference to the brain is telling. In a knowledge-based economy which deifies intellectual capital, an explanation has to be sought so that the privileged status of the intellectually gifted is not destabilised. Their graffiti is therefore attributed to an external influence. Hence, it also cannot be entertained.

It turns out that the mental incapacitation narrative is one that is not only used in relation to the intelligent-student-gone-rogue. It is accentuated in the following:

Some children naturally just have a mentality of being rowdy.

*Kungonakirwa nekunyora madziro nematsito. Kuti chikoro chikaure nekutenga mapaints or replastering*

They just derive pleasure from writing on the walls with charcoal. It's so that the school suffers by buying paint and spending money on replastering.

It sometimes happens subconsciously.

The responses highlight varying degrees of the students' mental disposition. (19) represents the highest degree of mental sickness. It characterises writers as naturally mentally unstable. Hence their 'inherent rowdiness'. It is akin to an admission that it is the nature of the beast. That is, students write graffiti not because they have anything of significance to say, but they were just born that way. More significantly, graffiti is implicitly characterised as a rowdy and therefore violent discourse. Rowdiness or violence is not anything that is to be entertained. More so at school where discipline is one of the core virtues that are cultivated in the students.

Proposition (20) is centred on students who just derive pleasure from vandalising surfaces so that the school ends up channelling resources to activities that should not be its core business: painting and replastering. Needless to point out that graffiti is in this case being characterised as a worthless activity which causes the school to spend resources on avoidable activities instead of channelling them towards the improvement of the teaching-learning process. In this case, the students do not even realise that their mischief borders on vandalistic malice. (21) might be demeaning in the sense that the student is not even seen as in control of their own mental faculties. Their writing of graffiti is seen as occurring without their knowledge. The implication is that they just find themselves having already written it. Resultantly, it questions why society at large should entertain something the students have no intention of writing in the first place. This is consistent with [6] observation that graffiti has traditionally been associated with disease, in general, and madness, in particular. Madness is a medical metaphor meant to back up the suggestion that graffitiists are, in fact, insane.

*Parentage and home background*

A strong correlation was made between graffiti writing and the writers' home background. In this research, parentage refers to whether the students stay with both parents at home, they stay in single-parent homes or maybe the parents are away. Traditionally, African people have generally used this

factor to predict and/or justify involvement in deviancy. Coupled with what is known/assumed to obtain at home, this knowledge is then used to characterise graffiti as from a morality perspective. What is assumed to happen at home is then seen by the teachers as being reflected by the students' behaviours at school, as captured by the following responses:

[The] behaviour of a learner at school is to some extent modelled at home. What a student show [sic] at school reflects what transpires at home. Use of abusive language at home cascades to school. The learner ends up using their most prevalent [to be read as defining/characteristic] language from home. Some parents when you call them for disciplinary issues concerning their children you would not believe the language they use. It is the reason why their child abuses others at school.

The responses highlight how moral capital is entangled in graffiti politics within the school. (22) adopts a behaviourist approach in asserting that the student is a direct product/reflection of their home environment. The student, in this case, is regarded as passively shaped by their home/familial forces. Ironically, they are seen as incapable of positively responding to the school's socialisation efforts. The abusive/vulgar language that 'characterises' graffiti is seen as the reflection of the kind of language used at home. There were however some responses that alluded not only to bad parenting but also to the absentee parents. This raised below:

It is written by students with no parents or guardians at home [Mostly done by] *vanogara vega* (those who live alone). *Vamwe vavo* (some) have parents in rural areas. (23) and (24) reveal a different dynamic. Rampant emigration, especially to the diaspora, has left some students staying by themselves in the urban areas. In some cases, it could be because they are orphaned. Whichever the case, these students are seen as lacking in moral guidance. Morality is seen as being imparted by parents. Parental absence is taken to imply lack of morality on the student's part. The socio-cultural significance of parenting is invoked in this narrative rationalising it as an immoral discourse.

Emerging from this morality narrative is the student's propensity to engage in such bad/negative behaviours as graffiti. This is highlighted in the response below:

He is from a well-to-do family with both parents. I suspect exposure to pornography through his brothers and sisters' phones. *Anotaura zvinotyisa zvebonde* (he says scary stuff about sex) and draws pics.

It brings out a paradoxical situation in so far as the student's background is concerned. This is made apparent by the emphasis on two factors which the respondent in question considered should not be associated with graffiti writing. The first relates to the fact that the student has both parents. This alone should have ensured that he receives enough guidance to deter/prevent him from writing graffiti. The second pertains to the family's financial stability. This is interesting in the sense that this is not really a new sentiment. There is a long history of people (politicians, teachers and researchers, among others) characterising graffiti as a poor person's

discourse. In western streams of knowledge, graffiti is actually regarded as the discourse of the streets, mainly produced by African Americans and Hispanics [6, 24, 33]. The student's good socio-economic background actually threatened to destabilise prevailing conventional beliefs about graffiti in the school system. Having failed to reconcile the two, the respondent attributes the student's involvement to the bad influence of technology and/or the student's siblings. This is possibly informed by, and at the same time feeds into, narratives on the corruptive tendencies of technology, particularly the internet and social media. Coming from a well to do family, the student can easily access the internet and might be on social media. This is then used to assume that he gets exposure to pornographic and related material, thereby explaining his preoccupation with sexual issues. Again, the underlying assumption is that there is nothing of value to be gained from writing graffiti.

#### *A discourse of the ghetto*

Zimbabwe's urban geography typically distinguishes between two major residential spaces; the high and medium density residential areas, on the one hand, and the low-density suburbs, on the other. Crucial is the link between urban spatial geographies with cultural and moral geographies. Implicated in the politics of the discursive closure of graffiti in the school system in Zimbabwe is its apparent conceptualisation as the discourse of the ghetto. The ghetto is a colonial vestige carried over into the African post-colony. During the colonial period, the city was neatly designed into zones based on a number of land-use factors. Residential areas were racially-based. African, Coloureds, Indians and Whites had their exclusive spaces. Africans stayed in the ghetto (referred to as locations in Southern Africa), a state-designated place of social stigma and exclusion [25, 7]. Thus, city spaces have definite meanings associated with them [3]. More so, pertaining to cultural capital.

The compartmentalisation of urban spaces invokes the notion of symbolic boundaries which, in turn, are implicated in collective identity and cultural capital, among others. Symbolic boundaries are "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorise objects, people, practices, and even time and space" [7]. They are "glorified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities" [7]. Stigma or prestige ascribed to space is then marked in the body of its associated or respective residents (Ibid). The education system was then designed according to these spaces. Each area (zone) has its own schools. Cross-pollination was not tolerated, resulting in an impermeability aptly summarised as a case of 'divided cities, divided schools' [3]. This was epitomised in the differential quality of the schools. The suburbs had premier schools (referred to as Group A schools) juxtaposed to poor schools in the ghetto.

The post-independence period destabilised this neat boundary dynamic. It opened up these schools to the rest of the city where any child can potentially attend any school.

However, the move created a one-directional movement of students. That is, ghetto students going to premier schools. Naturally, there was no opposite movement. The students from the suburbs did not cross the boundaries into the ghetto. This is akin to an 'osmotic migratory process' that can naturally only create problems in so far as the permeability of the city's symbolic boundaries is concerned. Suffice to say that the system introduced a zone-based education system where students are only assured easy or automatic enrolment in schools in and around their residential areas, thereby perpetuating the highly segregatory colonial system. Needless to say, in cases where perceived 'wrong/rogue elements' (that is, students from the ghetto) find themselves in premier schools, it is bound to irritate and ruffle a few furthers in so far as cultural capital and correctness are concerned. This dynamic play out in the responses below:

This is prevalent in schools which are in high density areas owing to the way these children are brought up. They live in crowded areas and are brought up to be aggressive. [also, by those with] no sense of cleanliness. Especially those from Mutapa and Ascot.

Maybe the culture of the school and environment can be factored in, like for example you can't expect that from a student from MCC to do that.

Apparently, the politics of labelling/categorisation still persists in the-ghetto-against-suburb narrative. (26) associates graffiti with schools in high density areas (the ghetto). High-density area have a 'crowding' problem. This is then seen as definitive/determinative in student's aggression. The response makes a number of assumptions which implicate graffiti as a space-phenomenon. First, graffiti is conceptualised as a ghetto schools' phenomenon. Schools in the central business district and suburbs are expected to have little or no graffiti. This goes against research findings which have revealed that graffiti is found across all sectors of the population not only in Zimbabwe but across the world. The second is that the children from the ghetto are inherently aggressive and those from the suburbs are gentle. Ultimately, graffiti is considered as aggressive. Given that aggression and/or bullying are frowned upon in the school system it follows that graffiti must not be tolerated. This, in turn, is considered to manifest in the children from these areas through a variety of ways. (27) explains why graffiti is found in the 'wrong' schools. This includes schools in the CBD and suburbs. Developing on the attribution on the permeability of the symbolic boundaries in post-colonial Zimbabwe, the ghetto students enrolled in premier schools are then held responsible for the presence of graffiti in these schools. These students are perceived as lacking any sense of cleanliness. That is, they are inherently/naturally dirty. The metaphor of dirt, and associated notions of pollution and transgression, has always been used to characterise how graffiti is perceived as destabilising otherwise ordered environments [6]. Its removal is then seen as critical in re-establishing the ordered environment. On one level, students from Mutapa and Ascot (Gweru high density

areas), are both described and ridiculed as the transgressors bringing dirt to otherwise clean schools, whilst on another, there is an insinuation that they may be actual dirt. As [6] explains, beliefs about dirt and pollution relate to power relations in society as they delineate, in an ideological fashion, what [or who] is out of place. Those who can define what is out of place are those with the most power in society.

The presence of students from the ghetto is considered as a flagrant disturbance of a clean environment. It echoes the proverbial 'you can take the child out of the ghetto but you can't take the ghetto out of the child'. (28) develops on this. Midlands Christian College (MCC), arguably Gweru's most elite high school, known to attract the most affluent from across the country. The students are 'naturally' thought to be from the suburbs. As such, they bring in a cultural capital which does not tolerate graffiti. Consistent with the argument that, pertaining to its agency, graffiti is a statement by a person/group perceived to occupy the societal margin [24]. Thus, mere attendance of 'good' schools is a superficial act that does not remove them from those margins.

## 4. Conclusion

It emerges that it is not the place where discourse is performed that necessarily styles it as front or backstage [32]. Rather, the attitudes adopted in interactions, and the participation framework involved are responsible for this classification. The study exposes a general tendency by high school teachers to evaluate the discursive legitimacy of graffiti, not on the basis of its content and, therefore, utility within the education system, but on its perceived spatiality and agency. It is a classic case of the prolongation of an enduring colonial intellectual apartheid through discourse. These attitudes mainly revolve around the spaces that are generally associated with its inscription (the toilet) and the part of the city that its writers are thought to come from (the ghetto). Based on the taken-for-granted nature of the perceived writers, teachers' attitudes emphasise the role of the 'prejudicial eye' in discursive negotiation. Ultimately, it ends up being a segregationist/separatist endeavour aimed at eliminating not only the presence of graffiti as a specific social problem from the school system, but also specific types of students. Thus, partly accounting for the prejudices that 'dull' students and those living in the ghetto experience within the school. It then justifies specific interventionist and managerial measures and strategies generally revolving around the sanitisation of the 'affected' walls and its perceived perpetrators. It is little wonder then that the attitudes carry undertones of ridding the school of unfit and unruly student elements. The study, therefore, emphasises the importance of discursive spaces, upon which texts rely for their meanings and 'political' force. It emerges that even though the teachers do in fact acknowledge that students have major issues to discuss



that need the freedom offered by graffiti, they are still sceptical about both its utility in the Zimbabwean school system and the nature of its producers. All these work towards its discursive closure thereby perpetuating the silencing of student voices in public schooling.

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