

## Sex and Class of Secondary School Students in Experiencing Emotional Abuse by Teachers in Edo State, Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of sex and class of secondary school students in experiencing emotional abuse. For this purpose, a survey designed was adopted in the study. A total of 1537 students, drawn through multistage proportionate sampling technique from all secondary school students in Edo state, participated in the study. The instrument, a questionnaire entitled, "Classroom Emotional Abuse Scale" was used to collect the data for this study. The results showed that male students experienced emotional abuse in the forms of terrorizing, isolating, ignoring, and verbal assaulting more than their female counterparts. The results also indicated that senior secondary school students experienced emotional abuse in the forms of dominating ( $\bar{x}=6.43$ ,  $SD=1.93$ ) and terrorizing ( $\bar{x}=6.40$ ,  $SD=1.71$ ) more than their junior secondary school counterparts in terrorizing ( $\bar{x}=6.16$ ,  $SD=1.70$ ) and dominating ( $\bar{x}=6.00$ ,  $SD=1.93$ ). The study further revealed that junior secondary school students experienced isolating ( $\bar{x}=4.40$ ,  $SD=1.60$ ) as a form of emotional abuse more than their senior secondary school counterparts ( $\bar{x}=4.11$ ,  $SD=1.42$ ). Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that teachers should mete equal treatment on students irrespective of their sex and class. In addition, internship programmes should be organized for pre-service teachers, while ongoing professional development programme should also be organized for in-service teachers to avoid emotionally abusive behaviour in the classroom which will eventually lead to child-centred learning environment.

**Keywords:** Psychological maltreatment, students, Edo State, child abuse, psychological abuse, emotional abuse, Nigeria

### INTRODUCTION

The term emotional abuse conjures up images of violence and cruelty. It infers a deliberate action, an intention to harm and to damage. It is an active label for the violations of one person's rights by another. Like other forms of violence in relations, emotional abuse is based on power and control. A clear-cut meaning of emotional abuse in the school system was provided by Glaser & Prior (1997), whereby they posited that emotional abuse is a repeated pattern of damaging interactions between the teachers and

the child that becomes typical of the relationship. Krugman & Krugman (1984) identified teachers' abusive behaviours as screaming at students to the extent that they cried, making degrading comments and labelling students as stupid and dumb. It is important to note that the severity of emotional abuse on students' learning cannot be underestimated. Hence, Geffner (2007) points out that emotional abuse can be thought of as the non-physical abuse of the self and spirit, which degrades self-worth and interferes with human development and productivity.

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Meanwhile, it is important to stress that classroom discipline should be differentiated from emotional abuse by teachers. Disciplinary practices used in schools to prevent and suppress students' misbehaviour should not be punitive and focus on behaviour and not on a student's personality, race, and ethnicity, disabling condition or sexual orientation (Charles, 1999). A research by Newberger (1997) has shown that a continuous use of emotional abuse on children can result in shrinkage of the regions of the brain that are responsible for memory, learning and the regulations of affect and emotional expression. Similarly, Perry (1993) has stated that the brains of maltreated children can be 20% to 30% smaller compared with their non-maltreated peers.

Research on child abuse has been plagued with much attention being placed on the physical and sexual abuse. In this regard, emotional abuse has been largely and apparently ignored. Yet, emotional abuse produces the most destructive consequences of all forms of child abuse (Garbarino & Vondra, 1987; Anda, Whitfield & Felitti, 2002; McEachern, Aluede & Kenny, 2008). Some teachers are unaware of the impacts of their behaviours on children (Shumba, 2002; Krugman & Krugman, 1984). It is possible that teachers are also unaware that emotional abuse is a form of child abuse that has serious damaging consequences on the children's development and their academic achievement in school.

The secondary school level of education coincides with adolescence stage of human development. In more specific, it is a time of "storm and stress". The storm and stress phenomenon means that adolescence is a turbulent time charged with conflicts and mood swings, and hence, parents and teachers should be careful in this transition period from childhood to adulthood. Teachers who work with adolescents may fail to understand, among other things, the nature of the transition through which adolescence passes and the special needs and developmental tasks of adolescence; the role of peer group in influencing adolescent

behaviour, as well as the problems arising out of sexual maturation (Okoza, 2009; Santrock, 2004). Failure to understand these adolescents' characteristics may lead to crises between teachers and students, which may probably prompt teachers to be emotionally abusive in the classroom.

A study by Brendgen, Wanner & Vitaro (2005) points out that inattention seems to provoke the teachers' scorn, especially for boys. One possible explanation that was adduced for this difference in maltreatment was that, in girls, a lack of attention may be considered a temporary lapse and, thus, be more readily excused or ignored than in boys. In the literature, male students are considered to be more involved in disruptive behaviours in the classroom, such as noise, shouting, fighting and throwing up, to get attention compared to girls (De Zolt & Hull, 2000). This may prompt teachers to emotionally abuse boys more than girls. Moreover, De Zolt & Hull (2000) posited that compliance, following rules and being neat and orderly, is valued and reinforced in many classrooms. The researchers have further stressed that these are behaviours which are typically associated with girls rather than boys and this may also account for the reason why boys experience emotional abuse more often than girls from their teachers.

In addition, the academic performance in the classroom between male and female students has also been shown as the reason why teachers emotionally abuse boys more than girls. The study of Good, Sikes & Brophy (1973) showed that low achieving boys were treated more negatively by both male and female teachers as compared to their female counterparts. Meanwhile, Casarjian (2000) showed that boys are more likely to have a conflicting relationship with their teachers than their female counterparts. Similarly, Hughes, Cavell & Willson (2001), Birch & Ladd (1998) and Kersner (2000) revealed that boys also experienced emotional abuse more than their female counterparts. In addition, Hyman & Wise (1979), Youssef, Attia, & Kamel (1998), and Benbenishty, Zeira, Astor & Khoury-Kassabri (2002) revealed that

many disciplinary confrontations with teachers involved boys and that they were emotionally abused more than the females.

The class of students in the school is often noted to influence their experience of emotional abuse. Students in junior secondary school class are expected to be at the early adolescent stage with the exception of late bloomers or slow learners, as well as bulks of students in senior secondary schools class are at the late adolescent stage. Apparently, their perceptions and interactions with teachers vary and hence their experience of emotional abuse may also be different as well. In Israel, Benbenishty, Zeira, Astor & Khoury-Kassabri (2002) reported that older students in senior high schools are much more vocal and powerful in protecting themselves against school authority than the younger ones in junior schools and they therefore experience less emotional abuse by educational staff. Youssef *et al.* (1998), Smith, Madsen & Moody (1999) also revealed that students in junior class are subjected to more maltreatment and more prone to victimization compared to students in the senior class.

### RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

At adolescent stage, there is a divergence in the levels of physical maturity between males and females. This may account for the differences in their behaviour in the classroom, which may lead them to experience emotional abuse from their teachers differently. Similarly, students in junior secondary schools may not experience emotional abuse in the same way with their senior secondary school counterparts. Therefore, this study was aimed at determining the influence of sex and class of students in experiencing emotional abuse. The gender of the students has also been indicated to influence their experiences of emotional abuse.

### METHOD

#### *Participants*

As indicated earlier, the survey design was utilized for the current study. The population of

the study was all the students in both the public and private secondary schools in Edo state of Nigeria. A total of 1559 students, who were drawn through the multistage proportionate sampling technique, were used to compose the sample for the study, though only 1537 (98.6%) returned their questionnaire, and were analysed in this study. The composite of the sample included 780 males and 757 females, which were also 820 junior secondary students and 739 senior secondary students.

#### *Measures*

The instrument used for the study was the Classroom Emotional Abuse Scale (CEAS), which was an adapted version of the Classroom Behaviour Scale (CBS) developed by McEachern, Aluede & Kenny (2003). Meanwhile, the scale proposed by McEachern *et al.* (2003) was adapted from the Nesbit & Philpot's (2002) Subtle Emotional Abuse Scale (SEAS). In the present study, the Classroom Emotional Abuse Scale (CEAS) modified the CBS to include other items on emotional abuse and account for the cross-cultural differences between North America and Nigeria, where the original instrument and this modified version (i.e. Classroom Emotional Abuse Scale or CEAS) were originally developed and used.

The present version of the Classroom Emotional Abuse Scale (CEAS) was validated by two experts in Educational Psychology in the Department of Foundations and Management, Faculty of Education, Ambrose Alli University Ekpoma, Nigeria. The aim was to ensure that the items in the instrument were capable of eliciting responses to answer the research questions. Some of the items in the instrument included the following: our teachers insult their students publicly; our teachers use responses such as "you did not listen", "your mind was not in the lesson", "you will never understand" when students ask questions; our teachers threaten to flog students; our teachers do not show concern for students' well-being; and our teachers are in the habit of scolding students who make mistakes in their lessons; our teachers lock

up students in the room for misbehaviour; our teachers do not give room to students to explain their side of the story/matter, and our teachers are very selective in assigning tasks to the students.

The reliability of the instrument was determined through the split-half method on a sample of thirty (30) secondary school students in Delta State. In the context of this study, the split-half method used yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.88.

*Procedures*

The instrument was administered by the principal author, with the aid of several research assistants in the sampled secondary schools. The completed copies of the questionnaire were collected on the spot.

*Results*

The results of this study are presented under the following two categories:

1. There is no significant difference between the male and female students in their experience of

emotional abuse. To test this hypothesis, the t-test for two independent sample means was applied. A summary of the analysis is presented in Table 1 below.

Based on the survey, it could be concluded that both the male and female students experienced rejection, discrimination, degrade, and domination as the forms of emotional abuse in approximately the same way. The results further revealed that significant differences existed in the way the male and female students experienced emotional abuse in the forms of terrorization, isolation, ignore, and verbal assaults, with the males experiencing terrorization, isolation, ignore, and verbal assaults from their teachers more often than their female counterparts.

2. There is no significant difference between students in the junior secondary schools and students in the senior secondary schools in term of their experience of emotional abuse. To test this hypothesis, the t-test of two independent sample means was applied. A summary of the analysis is presented in Table 2 below.

TABLE 1  
Experience of emotional abuse between male and female students

Variables	Sex	N	Mean	SD	df	t	p
Rejection	Female	749	5.76	1.75	1517	.56	>.05
	Male	770	5.71	1.69			
Discrimination	Female	741	6.51	2.14	1499	-1.45	>.05
	Male	760	6.66	1.95			
Degrade	Female	711	5.65	2.4	1448	-1.79	>.05
	Male	739	5.86	2.43			
Domination	Female	745	6.19	1.86	1508	-.69	>.05
	Male	765	6.25	1.77			
Terrorization	Female	731	6.08	1.63	1480	-4.47	< .05
	Male	551	6.47	1.75			
Isolation	Female	741	4.13	1.41	1500	-3.09	< .05
	Male	761	4.37	1.62			
Ignore	Female	733	5.36	1.94	1477	-3.79	< .05
	Male	746	5.74	1.85			
Verbal assaults	Female	750	5.75	1.92	1496	-2.68	< .05
	Male	748	6.03	2.07			

TABLE 2  
The experience of emotional abuse between students from the junior secondary schools  
and senior secondary schools

Variable	Class	N	Mean	SD	Df	t	P
Rejection	JSS	810	5.72	1.71	1534	-.50	>.05
	SSS	726	5.76	1.75			
Discrimination	JSS	796	6.59	1.10	1516	0.24	>.05
	SSS	722	5.56	2.09			
Degrade	JSS	761	5.66	2.23	1463	-1.83	>.05
	SSS	704	5.90	2.35			
Domination	JSS	800	6.00	1.72	1525	-4.66	< .05
	SSS	727	6.43	1.90			
Terrorization	JSS	780	6.16	1.70	1498	-2.54	< .05
	SSS	720	6.40	1.71			
Isolation	JSS	788	4.40	1.60	1512	3.59	< .05
	SSS	726	4.11	1.42			
Ignore	JSS	782	5.50	1.89	1492	-1.35	>.05
	SSS	712	5.62	1.90			
Verbal assaults	JSS	795	5.93	2.02	1514	0.99	>.05
	SSS	721	5.83	1.98			

Note: JSS - Junior Secondary School Students  
SSS - Senior Secondary Schools Students

Based on the survey, it can be concluded that SSS and JSS students experienced rejection, discrimination, degrade, ignore and verbal assaults as the common forms of emotional abuse in approximately the same way. The study further revealed that SSS students experienced domination and terrorization more often than the JSS students. In addition, the study also revealed that JSS students experienced isolation more frequently than their SSS counterparts.

### DISCUSSIONS

The study found that there was no significant difference between the male and female students in their experiences of emotional abuse, namely, rejection, discrimination, degrade, and domination. The study further exposed the significant difference between the male and female students in their experiences of terrorization, isolation, ignore, and verbal

assaults. Male students were found to experience terrorising, isolating, ignoring, and verbal assaults as the common forms of emotional abuse more often than their female counterparts. This result is worthwhile because, expectedly, male students may be more involved in classroom disruptive behaviours such as making noises, shouting, fighting, inattention, and throwing up to get attention from the teacher in classroom. These behavioural traits are usually associated with boys and they may account for the reasons why boys often experience terrorization, isolation, ignore and verbal assaults compared to their female counterparts. This finding is in agreement with that of Brendgen *et al.* (2005) who posited that boys were emotionally abused more often by the teachers than girls in the classroom because of inattention. Dezolt & Hull (2000) adduced that schools personnel tended to stereotype boys behaviour as problematic. Moreover, some teachers may have such

perception against boys which further prompts them to emotionally abuse boys. Thus, to have a conducive classroom environment for teaching and learning compliance to rules, neatness, and good behaviours are essential ingredients for classroom ambience. These positive behaviours are typically associated with girls rather than boys (Dezolt & Hull 2000), and this may account for one of the reasons why boys experience emotional abuse more than girls from their teachers.

To account for gender differences in the experience of emotional abuse, Hughes, Cavell & Wilson (2001) reported that low achieving boys have been shown to be more emotionally abused by both male and female teachers compared to girls. Similarly, Casarjian (2000) showed that boys experienced emotional abuse more often than females. It is possible that poor academic achievement and lack of attention may account for the reasons why teachers emotionally abused boys more frequently than girls in this study. Therefore, from this study, it could be concluded that gender is a strong predictor of emotional abuse by teachers.

In addition, the study also revealed that there was no significant difference between students in JSS and SSS in their experiences of rejection, discrimination, degrade, ignore, and verbal assaults. Thus, it can be concluded that teachers emotionally abuse students on these variables, irrespective of the class. The similarity in the experience of these forms of emotional abuse between the JSS and SSS students may be traceable modus operandi of exhibiting abusive behaviours in the classroom by teachers with words, actions and indifference. This fact is supported by Shumba (2002) and Krugman & Krugman (1984) who revealed that teachers are emotionally abusive in the classroom through their constant uses of words that affect the psychological well-being of students. Hence, it is safe to conclude that these forms of emotional abuse are perceived by students as psychosocial problems which may be endemic in their classroom and hence their similarities of experience in this study, irrespective of the class.

Nevertheless, significant difference was also found to exist between students in JSS and SSS in term of their experiences of dominance, terrorization and isolation. The study revealed that the students in SSS class experienced these forms of emotional abuse with particular reference to dominance and terrorization more than their JSS counterparts. What may be responsible for this difference could be the perception that the students in SSS may have been involved more in misbehaviours in the classroom, and further leads their teachers to emotionally abuse them more than the students of junior secondary schools. Thus, engagement in disruptive behaviours, such as bullying colleagues in the classroom and quest for identity by the students in SSS class, may prompt teachers to emotionally abuse them more often than the students in the junior secondary schools (JSS). It is a common knowledge in our school system that students in the SSS class tend to arrogate some privileges to themselves, on contrary with the ethos of our schools system. Ultimately, such unwholesome attitudes from the SSS class may predispose them to be constant conflicts with teachers and hence, their teachers emotionally abuse them through dominance and terrorization.

The study also found that the JSS students experienced isolation as a form of emotional abuse from their teachers more often than their SSS counterparts. This finding may not be too surprising given the fact that in our school system, there have been reports that teachers these days adopt isolation by placing students in “naughty corners”, which isolate the perceived problem ones from other students within the classroom. Psychologically, this kind of treatment is highly and emotionally abusive. Moreover, it is tantamount to removing problem students from positive reinforcement. Isolating students may cause them to yell, knock over furniture and soon on, and this, as a matter of fact, may disrupt the entire learning process. Isolation as a perceived correction measure carries a lot emotional injuries and should be avoided by teachers. This finding supports the work of Benbenishty *et al.* (2000) in Israel,

whereby they found that students in the junior secondary schools experienced emotional abuse more than those in the senior secondary schools.

### CONCLUSION

From the findings of the study, it can be concluded that sex and class of students influenced their experiences of emotional abuse. It is a serious problem that can significantly affect students' development and productivity in teaching-learning environment. Consequently, a full scale intervention involving all stakeholders in the education process, namely, students, teachers, parents and government, are necessary to ensure a good classroom ambience where students can have positive academic achievement. Moreover, studies should be conducted in the area of emotional abuse in Nigeria to enable policy makers have more information about emotional abuse and enact policies which will protect and prevent students against emotional abuse by their teachers in the school process and at the home front of children.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Since the study has found out that there seems to be a disproportionate treatment of students, with boys experiencing emotional abuse more than their female counterparts and senior secondary school students experiencing emotional abuse more than their junior secondary school counterparts, teachers should avoid selective treatment of students. This action from teachers negates the principles of justice and equity. Consequently, teachers should mete equal treatment on students irrespective of their sex and class. More importantly, there should be equal educational opportunities in the classroom.

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