

The Effect of Hate Speech on Secondary School Students' Academic Performance in Umuahia North LGA, Abia State

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Abstract

Research has shown that when learners are emotionally destabilized, its negative impact on learning experiences and achievement is inevitable. The use of hateful expressions by teachers and peers which targets the students' disabilities, gender, ethnic backgrounds, and so on, is generating a stepwise entry into schools, consequently demotivating learning and affecting achievement. The thrust of this study therefore, is to first, examine copious hate expressions used by teachers and peers and their resultant effects on secondary school students' emotions and academic performance. Secondly, to investigate the gender of teachers and peers that use hate speech more. Data for the study were generated through a questionnaire administered on one hundred and twenty randomly selected students as well as twenty teachers respectively. The participants were drawn from four public secondary schools in Umuahia North L.G.A., Abia State, Nigeria. The result indicates among other things, that hate expressions leave students with a feeling of low self-esteem, depression, loneliness, absenteeism, leading to poor academic performance as well as final drop out from school. The paper calls for strict measures against the use of incendiary statements on students by teachers and prohibition of hate language in our institutions of learning. In addition, negative peer group influence should be discouraged by education stakeholders.

Keywords: *Hate speech, Students, Teachers, Academic performance, Umuahia.*

Introduction

A school is both an educational and a social environment where students interact with both their peers and teachers. These interactions are part of the socialization that go on in the school system, which might be positive or negative. Positive interactions encourage students to feel safe and motivated at school but when the interactions are negative, they inhibit comprehensible input and adversely distort learning.

Hate speech, a negative aspect of interaction, is one of the phenomena that can denigrate the child's confidence, invariably, affecting academic performance. Hate speech, according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary is speech that is intended to insult, offend or intimidate a person because of some traits such as race, religion, sexual orientation, national origin or disability. Adhlakun (2017, p.1), defines hate speech as "any speech that is used to demean persons based on their identifiers such as race, gender, sexuality, disabilities, ethnicity and predispose them to acts of violence". The two definitions are similar; apart from the fact that Adhlakun (2017, p.1) added that hate speech could predispose people to acts of violence. For the purpose of this study, any speech made with hostility and extreme dislike on another based on some disabilities can be categorized as a hate speech. It is important to draw a divide line between hate speech and reprimand. While the latter has the intention of correcting someone's bad behaviour (in case of teacher-student relationship), the former is intended to undervalue and disparage the recipient.

Teachers and peer group members play important roles in the academic success of students. Following Waseka, Simatwa and Okwach, (2016), the teacher is the number two factor that influences students' academic performance. They can either facilitate or inhibit students' learning experiences.

Olsen (2016) reported of a study by Child Trends, a nonprofit organization that focuses on research related to children and youth. The study was a descriptive survey that examined trends related to students' reports of being targets of hate speech. He used young people as his research population where they were asked if anyone had traduced them at school based on their race, religion, ethnic background or national origin, disability, gender or sexual orientation. From the study, girls significantly reported being targets of hate-related words based on gender than boys. The study further found out that those experiences could negatively affect the health and wellbeing of young people. The study also noted that victims of hate words express feelings of anger, loneliness, powerlessness, as well as higher rates of depression and anxiety. Olsen's work was found relevant to this study because it revealed the negative backwashes of hate speech on students.

Shah (2009), examined the impact of teachers' behaviour on the academic achievement of University students in Pakistan. The study revealed that a majority of the teachers were proud to be teachers. They listened to the students with patience and tolerance. The teachers expressed that they focused on character building of the students and the students also stated that their teachers appreciated them with kind words when they perform well. The paper observes that the relationship between the teachers' behaviour and corresponding academic achievement of the students show that there was a high positive significant correlation between the behaviour of teachers with the academic achievements of students. The high positive behaviour of teachers towards their students led to high academic achievement of the students.

Although some studies have examined the effect of teacher behaviour on the academic performance of students (Olsen 2016, Shah 2009, Wiseman 2014), none has specifically investigated the effect of hate speech by both teachers and peers on the academic performance of public secondary school students in Umuahia and their emotions.

The present paper is an attempt at determining the extent to which hate speech affects students emotionally and consequently affect their academic performance. The paper further examines the gender of teachers and peers who use hate speech on students more.

Theoretical Framework

The speech act theory is chosen for this study. The theory was introduced by Oxford Philosopher J. I. Austin (1962) and further developed by an American philosopher, J. R. Searle (1969) (Nordquist, 2017). Speech act theory is a theory of language that stipulates that our utterances (the things we say) are not just about words and their dictionary definitions. Our utterances can accomplish things and bring about various actions (Kushinka, 2017). According to this source, some of the things we do with language may not be physical actions like swimming or smiling but they may be commands, greetings, assessments, promises or even threats or insults. They are all speech arts. As noted by Ndimele (2007), "utterances are acts in themselves capable of producing enormous and far-reaching results or consequences. Utterances can affect our whole lives. They can deny us or restore our freedom..."

Speech act theory considers three levels of actions that utterances perform. The first is the locutionary act which has to do with the production of a grammatical and meaningful utterance (Ndimele, 2007). The second is the illocutionary act which is the act performed by the speaker by virtue of the utterance he produces. Illocutionary act has to do with the speaker's intent. The last one is perlocutionary act which is performed by the hearer as a result of the effect or influence that the utterance of the speaker has on him (Ndimele, 2007). In other words, perlocutionary act is the consequence of the speaker's utterance on the behaviour of the hearer.

The paper is leveraging on perlocutionary speech art theory to show that utterances made by teachers and peers have effect on the students' behaviour. Negative utterances therefore cause various psychological/emotional reactions from the hearers who are victims of the hate language.

Methodology

Data for the paper were generated through a questionnaire administered on 120 randomly selected students and 20 teachers in four public secondary schools in Umuahia, Abia State, using the questionnaire and interview methods. Umuahia is the capital of Abia Sate in South Eastern Nigeria. One of the reasons for selecting only public schools is that hate speech is likely to be more in public schools than private schools.

The respondents comprise senior secondary school students aged between fourteen and eighteen years. This set of students was preferred because they see themselves as senior students and they are more likely to use hateful expressions. Besides this, it was assumed that the senior students would state their case better than the junior ones. In each of the four schools, 30 students were selected from senior secondary 1 (SS 1) to senior secondary 3(SS 3). Ten students were randomly selected in each class. On the other hand, five teachers were randomly selected in each school used for the study.

The questionnaire was administered in the four public senior secondary schools selected for the study. This was done with the permission of the respective principals, who assigned some teachers to assist in giving out the questionnaire to the students as well as copies meant for teachers. All the respondents were informed about the purpose of the research and they were told that participation was not compulsory. The data were annotated using simple percentage and frequencies and represented in tables.

Findings

Table 1: Student response on hate speech

Variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage
How often do fellow students use hate speech on you?	Always	29	24.6
	Occasionally	40	33.9
	Rarely	33	28
	Never	15	12.7
	Not indicated	1	0.8
	Total	118	100.0
Gender of fellow students that use hate speech	Male	63	53.4
	Female	35	29.66
	Both	11	9.3
	Not indicated	9	7.6
	Total	118	100.0
Emotional effect	Depressed	59	50

	Embarrassed	31	26.27
	Lonely	13	11
	Avoided school	2	1.7
	Did not feel bad/no effect	7	6
	Not indicated	6	5
	Total	118	100.0
Class teacher has used hate speech on me	Yes	71	60.17
	No	41	34.74
	No Answer	6	5.08
	Total	118	100.0
Effect of teacher's hate speech	Angry/depressed	29	24.57
	Embarrassed	41	34.74
	Lonely	2	1.7
	Avoided school	7	6
	Did not feel bad/no effect	13	11
	Not indicated	26	22
	Total	118	100.0
Effect on academic performance	Great extent	25	21.18
	Some extent	10	8.47
	Very little	32	27.11
	No extent	47	39.83
	Not indicated	4	3.38
	Total	118	100.0
Fear of answering question in class to avoid embarrassment	Strongly agree	35	29.66
	Agree	34	28.81
	Disagree	32	27.11
	Strongly disagree	15	12.7
	Not indicated	2	1.7
	Total	118	100.0
Gender of teachers that use hate speech on me	Male	18	15.25
	Female	63	53.38
	Both	3	2.54
	Not indicated	34	28.81
	Total	118	100

According to Table 1, 24.6% of the respondents were of the view that students always use hate speech on their peers, while 33.9% indicated that their fellow students use hate speech occasionally on them. Those who indicated that hate language was rarely used on them were 28% whereas 12.7% said it was never used on them. This analysis shows that 86.5% of the respondents (students) indicated that hate speech was used on them to some extent.

On the gender distribution of the students that use hate speech more than others, those who claimed that the male students use it more than the female students were 53.4%. 29.66% indicated that the females use it more than the males, whereas 9.3% were of the view that both male and female students use it.

Table 1 also shows that hate language has emotional effect on students. The distribution of this effect showed that those who were depressed by it were 50%, embarrassed 26.27%, and lonely 11%. Those who considered avoiding school as a result were 1.7%, while 6% did not suffer any emotional effect. Regarding the use of hate language by the class teachers, 60.17% of the students admitted that their class teacher has used hate speech on them, while 34.74% indicated that their class teachers have not used it on them. On the emotional effect of the teachers' use of hate speech on the students,

24.57% agreed that it made them angry and depressed, 34.74% were embarrassed, 1.7% felt lonely as a result, 6% considered avoiding school, and 11% did not suffer any effect as a result.

The table also shows the effect of teachers' hate speech on the academic performance of the students as follows: great extent 21.18%, some extent 8.47%, very little 27.11% and no extent 39.83%. The gender distributions of the teachers that use hate language on the students are male 15.25%, female 53.38%, and both 2.54%. Based on this table, while the gender distribution of the students that use hate speech suggests that more males use it than the females, the teacher distribution indicates that the female teachers use hate language more than the males.

Some examples of hate expressions used by students in form of name calling on their peers bother on appearance such as *ugly, flat nose, big mouth, goat head, mango head, dwarf, hunch back, and bow leg*. Another form of hate language used by the students hinges on intellectual ability such as *dull brain, illiterate, school dropout, block head, mumu (fool), you don't know anything, lazy, you ask stupid questions, etc.* Some hate expressions by those students were derogatory such as *stupid, idiot, fool, senseless, a nobody, prostitute, hopeless idiot, foolish, vagabond, bastard, goat and useless*. There were also instances of hate language that were belittling such as *coward, dummy, joker, small boy, not my level, etc.* and finally some hateful expressions were insulting to parents such as *your father, born by mistake etc.*

Table 2: Teachers' response on hate speech

Variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Years of teaching experience	1-5 years	0	0
	6-10 years	0	0
	11-15 years	10	58.82
	16-20 years	1	5.88
	Above 20 years	6	35.3
Have you used hate speech on your students?	Total	17	100.0
	Yes	9	52.94
	No	8	47.05
	Total	17	100.0
Reason for using hate speech on your students	Intellectual disability	8	47.05
	Physical disability	0	0
	Gender	0	0
	Ethnic reasons	0	0
	No reason	9	52.94
	Total	17	100.0
How did the student feel?	Angry/Depressed	3	17.64
	Embarrassed	3	17.64
	Lonely	0	0
	Avoided school	0	0
	Did not feel bad/no effect	5	29.41
	Not indicated	6	35.3
	Total	17	100.0
Extent of the effect	Great extent	0	0
	Some extent	2	11.76
	Very little	5	29.41
	No effect	4	23.52
	Not indicated	6	35.3
	Total	17	100.0
It affects students class work and assignments	Strongly agree	0	0
	Agree	1	5.88
	Disagree	3	17.64
	Strongly disagree	6	35.3
	Not indicated	7	41.17
	Total	17	100.0
Hate speech affects students performance in the examination	Strongly agree	0	0
	Agree	2	11.76
	Disagree	5	29.41
	Strongly disagree	4	23.52
	Not indicated	6	35.3
	Total	17	100.0

Table 2 shows the teachers' response on the items in the instrument on hate speech. According to this table, 58.82% of the teachers indicated that they have taught for 11-15 years, 5.88% for 16-20 years and 35.3% for above 20 years. On whether they have used hate speech on their students, 52.94% of the teachers admitted to using it, while 47.05% denied using hate speech on their students. Whereas 47.05% gave intellectual disability of the students as their reasons for using hate language, 52.94% indicated that there was no reason for using hate speech on the students. However, no teacher selected physical disability, gender or ethnic consideration as the reason for using hate speech.

With regard to how the students feel when hate speech is used on them, 17.64% of the teachers indicated that the students were angry and depressed, 17.64% also indicated

that the students were embarrassed, 29.41% stated that the students did not suffer any effect and 35.3% did not indicate any response to this item. On the extent of the effect, no teacher indicated great extent. Those who indicated some extent were 11.76%, 23.52% said there was no effect while 35.3% did not respond to this item.

The response of the teachers on the item which states that hate speech affects students class work and assignments shows strongly agree 0%, agree 5.88%, Disagree 17.64%, strongly disagree 35.3% whereas, 41.17% of the teachers did not indicate any response. No teacher indicated that he/she strongly agreed that hate language affects students' academic performance. However, those who agreed were 11.76%, disagree 29.41%, strongly disagree 23.52% and those who did not respond to this item were 35.3%. Instances of hate expressions used by teachers on their students on appearance were *this one that has hunchback going for competition, you look like a maggot*, on intellectual ability were *moron, isi agboncha (dullard), lazy student, blockhead, unserious student, empty brain, a disgrace, good for nothing, you can't make it*. Some of the teachers' hate language on students were derogatory such as *foolish, silly fool, ewu (goat), bloody fool, bastard, good-for-nothing, stubborn, naughty boy, you will be useless in life*, while some were belittling such as *short man and coward*. There were other examples of hate expressions by teachers that were either insulting to the students' parents such as *you behave like your illiterate father* or they were implicatures such as *junkie, chameleon, stop wasting your parent's money, I.T.K – I too know, we have not been paid our salary and you expect us to teach you everything*.

Discussions

Following from tables 1 and 2, it is evident that both students and teachers use incendiary expressions capable of destabilizing the emotional balance of students. Teachers' creation and maintenance of positive associations with students in the learning process is more effective than creating negative ones (Pavlov, 1928). When students are made to be happy in the learning environment, they sustain a sense of resilience, mindfulness, and even physical health that can promote academic excellence. The findings revealed that a great number of both teachers and students use hate expressions on their students (60.17% and 86.5%) respectively. These negative social emotional dispositions may have contributed to poor academic performance of students in the schools investigated.

The findings further show the extent to which hateful expressions affect the academic performance of the subjects. When summed up, 57% of respondents account its effects on class participation, which consequently impact their learning experiences. This result is in consonance with Lopez and Du-Bois (2015), whose study recorded negative impact of peer victimization and hateful expressions, serving as pathways to poor academic outcomes and Olsen (2016) whose study noted that victims of hate expressions feel less safe at school, resulting to poor academic performance.

For the teachers, no respondent indicated that hate speech affects the academic performance of the students to a great extent. Since teachers are not the targets of hate expressions, the impact may not be recorded and established. Students are the beneficiaries of positive social relations and otherwise, negative. Their report, as targets of hate related words is evidence that they feel low self-worth. The difference between students' and teachers' perceptions of hate expressions in relation to academic performance inclines the researchers to draw two inferences. First, some teachers are unaware of the contributions

of negative or positive emotional contents of their students in the learning environment on achievement, hence, the incendiary expressions in classrooms. Secondly, some teachers are indisposed to the fact that students' emotions, according to Izad, Stark, Trentacosta and Schultz (2008) contain motivational components and influence cognition and adaptive functioning.

Other emotional effects of hate speech on the students as the findings further revealed include: A feeling of embarrassment (50% of respondents) depression (26.27%) loneliness (11%), anger (24.57) dropping out of school (1.7%). The result is in keeping with Valiente, Carlos, Swanson and Eisenberg (2012) who studied negative emotions as a result of hateful expressions and academic achievement. Their descriptive survey revealed that hateful expressions make students to feel low self-worth, depressed and powerless which affect their academic performance.

The study also revealed that intellectual disability was the main reason teachers advertently or inadvertently use expressions that could disparage students. This is unlike previous studies which recorded hate speech as a result of race, religion, colour, etc.

Male students, from the findings above, use hate speech (53.4%) more than the female students (29.66) when we examined which gender use hateful expressions profusely. The result is contrary to Lopez and Dubois's study (2015) and Olsen (2016). Lopez and Dubois's study recorded that girls were more likely to report being targets and users of hate speech based on gender discrimination than were the boys. Olsen (2016) also discovered that girls are significantly targets of hate-related words more than boys are. Their findings partially agree with the result of this study that the male students use hate speech more than the female students. For the teachers, the findings further show that a greater number of respondents (53.38%) affirm that female teachers use hate language more than the male teachers.

Although the objective of this study is not to uphold who uses hate expressions more, but to establish the backwashes of imploring incendiary expressions on students in relation to achievement. Shah (2009) discovered that high positive behaviour of teachers towards their students led to the high academic achievement of the students, invariably, *pari pasu*.

Conclusion

The descriptive survey which simultaneously sought to examine the effect of hate speech on secondary school students' academic performance and the gender of teachers and peers that use hate speech more, reveal that teachers and peers use expressions which denigrate students based on intellectual disabilities, leaving the students with feelings of embarrassment, loneliness, low self-worth, depression, and anger, which consequently affect their behavioural experiences. In addition to establishing that negative social emotional dispositions contribute to poor academic performance of students, the study through its findings show that students avoid school as a result of the use of hate speech on them. Female teachers, as the study finally unveils, use hate speech more than their male counterparts while male students use hate speech more than female students.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were suggested:

- There should be a law prohibiting the use of hate speech by both teachers and students in our institutions of learning.

- Students should report teachers that use hate language on them to the appropriate authority and such students should not be victimized for doing that.
- Parents, from homes, should discourage the use of denigrating words among their children.
- Negative peer group influence should be discouraged by education stakeholders.

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