

Psychological Maltreatment of Students: A Form of Child Abuse and School Violence

Oyaziwo Aluede

*Department of Educational Foundations, Ambrose Alli University,
P.M.B. 14, Ekpoma 310001, Nigeria
Email: oyaziwoaluede@yahoo.com*

KEYWORDS Student. Teacher. Abusive Behaviour. Child Abuse. School Success Students' Well-being

ABSTRACT This paper examines psychological maltreatment of students by their teachers. Attention was drawn to teachers' behaviours that constitute psychological maltreatment, and the consequences of psychological maltreatment on students' social, behavioural and psychological patterns. In addition, counselling advocacies are suggested, which we hope school counsellors may adopt in bringing the public to awareness of the dangers of psychological maltreatment of students; and also some strategies that school counsellors may adopt in developing human relations skills that would help teachers turn away from psychological maltreatment of students.

School violence has been reported as one of the most important and devastating social problems facing school children and their parents, to the extent that students perceive their school context as an unsafe environment (Astor and Meyer, 2001). Even though, school violence is given attention, little is said about another dimension of school violence, which is victimization of school children by their teachers in the school system that has either been denied or under-reported (Astor and Meyer, 2001; Benhenishty et al., 2002).

Psychological maltreatment or abuse remarked Hart et al. (1987) is the most devastating form of all the three forms of child abuse (Sexual, Psychological and Physical), because of its traumatic effects in the development of school children. It is different from other forms of child abuse because it cannot be easily detected. Unlike other forms of abuse, a perpetrator of psychological maltreatment can abuse many victims at one particular moment. The thrust of this paper is three fold: (a) provide information on teachers' behaviours that constitute psychological maltreatment in the classrooms; (b) the consequences of psychological maltreatment of students; and (c) advocate counselling strategies that school counsellors may adopt in bringing the public to greater awareness, and also assist in developing better human relation skills.

DEFINITION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL MALTREATMENT

Defining psychological or emotional

maltreatment isn't so easy to do, because researchers have not quite agreed on its exact definition. More difficult is the fact that some have tried to differentiate between "Emotional" and "Psychological" maltreatment, contending that the concepts are not necessarily synonymous (O'Hagan, 1993). Further, O'Hagan (1995) remarked that psychological abuse is defined as impeding the mental (especially cognitive) and moral faculties. This distinction according to Glaser (2002) is not considered to be useful since cognition and emotion are not independent of each other; as cognitive appraisal of experience contribute to the affective experience and vice versa

It is also pertinent to mention that serious work on what psychological maltreatment entails didn't begin until mid-to-late 1980s, when two groups of investigators: Garbarino et al. and Hart et al. (cited in Kemp, 1998) took specific interest in this area. Although, the notion that one could be psychologically or emotionally maltreated has been accepted clinically for many years, and the psychological or emotional maltreatment category of the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect National Surveys has existed since the 1980s, but, the term has not been legitimized or commonly used as it is today (Geffner et al., 1998).

Psychological maltreatment as a matter of fact may be the most difficult to study. With physical abuse and child sexual abuse, the acts of maltreatment may be more readily identifiable because the perpetrator breaks fairly clear cut social rules. In psychological maltreatment we

are dealing with the intangibles. The abuse usually takes place over a period of time and is hard to identify without being privy to the innermost working of families (Kemp, 1998). It is also difficult to study because of cultural variations in what constitutes an abuse. For example, public humiliation of a person which is generally regarded as a form of abuse in the Euro-American culture is part of the child-rearing practices of the Chinese culture aimed at scaring the would-be-culprits (O'Brian and Lau, 1995).

In spite of lack of a generally accepted definition of psychological maltreatment due the differences in what constitute psychological maltreatment, psychological or emotional abuse involves attacks on the self or spirit (Nesbit and Philpott, 2002), which creates distress and may interfere with an individual's ability to develop and mature in healthy ways. Thus, psychological maltreatment can be thought of as the non-physical degradation of the self which lowers worth and interferes with human development and productivity (Geffner and Robbie Rossman, 1998).

Psychological maltreatment refers to patterns of psychologically abusive or neglectful behaviour that occurs in a child's life that can have a destructive and perhaps permanent impact (Kemp, 1998). It also involves the denial of a person's psychological needs or interferes with the person's effort to satisfy psychological needs to the point that the person becomes seriously maladapted (Hart et al., 1987).

Psychological maltreatment may take the form of the following: verbal and non-verbal name calling, mocking of the students' appearance and (dis)abilities, humiliating the student in front of classmates and blatantly discriminatory behaviour against certain students (Benbenishty et al., 2002). It is also the use of verbally abusive language to harshly criticize and denigrate a child (Besharov, 1990).

PREVALENCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL MALTREATMENT IN SCHOOLS

Even though the prevalence of psychological maltreatment is not documented because of its difficulty to research, when compared with other forms of child abuse, and also because of lack of consistent definition, which has made it difficult to detect, assess and substantiate; the effects have

only been recently recognized. Hyman and Snook (1999) maintain that 50-60 percent of any group of people report that they have had at least one school-related experience that caused them psychological trauma. Similarly, according to available statistics from the year 2000 Child Maltreatment Report, of the 879,000 victims who suffered child abuse and neglect during year 2000, 75 percent of them were victims of psychological maltreatment. With the highest rates found in males and females who are ages 0-7 years (US Dept of Health and Human Services, 2002, as cited in McEachern et al., 2003).

Benbenishty et al. (2002) also have presented evidence that indicate incidents of psychological maltreatment of students especially among junior high and senior high school students by educational staff in Israel. Benbenishty et al. (2002) reveal that about a quarter (24.9 percent) of their sample reported being humiliated or cursed at least once during the month prior to survey administration. They further observed that physical victimization and sexual harassment, the students maintained were less frequent. Shumba (2002) also reports very similar situation in Zimbabwe. Hence it may be correct to conclude that incidents of psychological maltreatment of students by their educational staff seem high across the world.

Teachers' Behaviour and Psychological Maltreatment

We are reminded that the only comprehensive study to have examined psychological maltreatment within school context is that by Krugman and Krugman (1984, as cited in Shumba, 2002). The victims reported the following behaviours of their teachers: harassment; verbal put-downs; labeling (stupid, dummy); inconsistent erratic behavior; screaming at the children until they cried; inappropriate threats to try to control classes; allowing some children to harass and belittle others; use of homework as punishment; throwing homework at children and physical punishment (Shumba, 2002).

Psychologically maltreated victims have also been known to report the following actions of their teachers: humiliations of students in the public, name calling, cursing students and their families, poking fun at the students' appearance and abilities and similar degrading behaviours. In some cases, the behaviour is occasional and

infrequent. In other cases, the behaviour becomes a repeated pattern of bullying a particular student who has been singled out by a specific staff member (Shumba, 2002). The case of Israel readily comes to mind where Benbenishty's et al. (2002) study reveal that 20.9 percent of their sample reported being mocked, insulted or humiliated by an educational staff member. They further revealed that almost a quarter of all the children participating in that study (24.9 percent) reported being victimized by a staff member who either humiliated or cursed at them at least once during the month prior to the survey administration.

EFFECTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL MALTREATMENT

According to Dean (1979), in true cases of psychological maltreatment, the consequences of being subjected to it is that it becomes the dominant characteristic in the child's life. As a result, those who are psychologically maltreated don't become competent adults, capable of developing to their full potentials. In the same vein, Shumba (2002) warned that pupils should not be psychologically maltreated because: it humiliates and dehumanizes them; it destroys their self-concept or image; it makes them to hate school; it de-motivates and discourages them learning; it deforms their character; it makes them shy; it makes them confused; it disgraces them; and it frightens them. In addition, emotionally abused school children tend to exhibit the following symptoms: excessive worry about school performance; change from positive to negative self-perception; verbalized fear that teacher would hurt them; excessive crying about school; headaches; stomach aches; decreased functioning in social situation outside class; nightmares or sleep disturbances; school avoidance; and withdrawal behaviour or depression.

Social Effect

Kemp (1998) reports a model relating to problems associated with school years of psychologically abused children, and concludes that psychologically abused children have problems of inferiority, difficulty in stabilizing, problem of autonomy and initiative; experience difficulty making friends and learning to

cooperate; and experience problems completing tasks. Others include low self-esteem or a negative self, problems with achievement and ability; intimacy and social withdrawal. In addition, psychologically maltreated children in their early life experience problems of shame and doubts, impaired sense of self control, guilt, sense of failure and having difficulty finding joy in doing things. Hoglund and Nicholas (1995) also report a strong relationship between shame and history of psychological maltreatment. To Rohner and Rohner (1980), psychologically maltreated children suffer from low self-esteem and problem of achievement ability.

Maggiolo (1998) reports that psychologically maltreated children not only remain isolated during opportunities for free play with other children, but also exhibit withdrawn and aggressive behavior. They would rarely interact with their peers, and lack a sense of humour and positive affect. Psychological maltreatment can also affect a child's social development, which may result in an impaired ability to perceive, feel, understand and express emotions.

Behavioural Effect

Dean (1979) argues that the reason why issues bothering on psychological maltreatment should concern us is because of the personal and social consequences, which could include behaviour and character disorders, increased risk of developing severe mental illness, and becoming severely handicapped in being able to relate to others in a positive way.

Victims of psychological maltreatment may negate themselves; demonstrate most clearly in some individuals with dissociative identity disorder, within whom one state denies the existence of others. These findings are often manifest in destructive behaviour directed against one's own body (such as cutting, burning, punching, pain-inducing masturbation, bulimia or anorexia) or risk-taking like drunken driving or engaging in high-risk sexual behaviour such as unprotected sexual intercourse or sexual activity with strangers (Pearlman, 1998).

Brown (1984) investigated the relationship between child maltreatment and juvenile delinquency and reports that psychological maltreatment and neglect were found to be positively correlated with all forms of juvenile delinquency. The study even reported that

physical abuse did not correlate with juvenile delinquency. Thus, most psychologically maltreated children are aggressive and rarely hesitate to hit when angry. They are seen constantly picking fights with others and in other times cold, hard and unfeeling (Gootman, 1993).

Psychologically maltreated school children may also experience maladjustment in schools, exhibiting some negative effects resulting in a strong learning effect (Imbrogno, 2000). Hence, certain current practices within the school by educational staff aimed at curbing school violence; end up increasing the frequency and severity of violence by these children and their peers (Hyman and Perone, 1998; Imbrogno, 2000).

Hyman and Wise (1979) and Hyman et al. (1998) have differently investigated a wide range of educator's victimizing behaviours like ridicule, physical assault, isolation, verbal discrimination and sexual harassment. They came to the conclusion that children who are exposed to these abusive behaviours have a higher likelihood of developing a series of symptoms, such as, aggressive behaviour, fearful reactions, somatic complaints, dependency and regression.

Emotional Effects

Psychological maltreatment thwarts or is a direct attack on basic physiological, safety, love and belonging and self-esteem needs. By virtue of its opposition to the basic needs, it is considered to have the power to produce maladaptive deviances in the development and behavior of its victims (Hart et al., 1998).

Krugman and Krugman's (1984, as cited in Hart et al., 1998) and Hyman's (1985, as cited in Hart et al., 1998) studies that investigated the effects of psychological maltreatment of pupils by their teachers in elementary schools came to the conclusion that psychologically maltreated school children tend to change from positive to negative self-perception, change from positive perception of school to negative perception, cry excessively about school, have verbalized fear that their teacher would hurt them at school, have headaches, stomach aches, depression, nightmares. Other effects include having withdrawn behaviour, negative life views, school avoidance, decreased functioning in social situations outside the school and other sleep disturbances.

Psychological maltreatment can severely

damage a person's sense of self-worth and perception. In children, it can impair emotional/psychological development including intelligence, recognition, perception, attention, imagination, and moral development (Maggiolo, 1998). Furthermore, psychologically maltreated students tend to suffer a greater decline in psychological development which usually lowers their self-esteem (Nesbit and Philpott, 2002); and also tend to have a negative perception about themselves, their abilities and the world around.

A psychologically maltreated student may learn to fear the teacher rather than respect him/her. The teacher becomes an aversive individual in the student's life, some one to escape from or avoid (Gootman, 1993; Maggiolo, 1998). At other times, these children are usually hyper vigilant by being fearful, suspicious and mistrustful, or always on the lookout for potential dangers. Often, they are moody and afraid to express their feelings (Gootman, 1993).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

There is the growing concern on how incidents of psychological maltreatment can be totally eliminated in our educational system, because of its damaging consequences on the students' overall development. School counsellors could render very useful assistance in this regard. To this end, counselling advocacies are presented that would further assist school counsellors in that regard.

A way to bring about the full functioning of the school child and would be able to overcome all forms of psychological maltreatment in any specific school is for counsellors to be able to impress on school management and significant others on the need to always transfer abusive teachers from their present schools. This approach has been found to be very successful in the past. The case of Zimbabwe comes to mind, the removal of abusive teachers from the school (where they have been reported to emotionally abuse students) was followed by a positive change in the behaviour of 15 of the 17 students that had previously been abused (Shumba, 2002).

Mearn (cited in Nesbit and Philpott, 2002) reporting from his counselling experience at the Jordanhill College of Education at Glasgow, observes that much of teachers' emotional abusive behaviours stem from fear, as well as defensiveness, and lack of confidence. It is also

a reflection of teachers' feeling of inadequacy and the need to dominate in a situation perceived as threatening. In this regard, school counsellors should be able to offer support to teachers so that they can begin to feel less threatened and be able to honestly confront their own behaviour and reveal the insecurity and fear underlying ugly defensive façade.

Benbenishty et al. (2002) have drawn a relationship between psychological maltreatment and inadequate response of teachers due largely to lack of alternative skills. One way to correct this is through educational counselling; whereby school counsellors would engage in public awareness campaigns, organization of seminars, workshops, and conferences to change the attitude of teachers. School counsellors could possibly facilitate the workshops where human relations skills would be taught to the teachers. The human relations training workshops would be expected to help teachers identify the situations that provoke them and also help them acquire skills that would reduce those inappropriate treatment of students. In addition, school counsellors should be able to also acquaint teachers with nurturance skills, which will help them appreciate the fact that some students on entering the school are venturing beyond the security at home for the first time. In addition, teachers must share in the developmental responsibilities with the home (Nesbit and Philpott, 2002).

As already observed, there seems to be no agreement in what exactly constitutes psychological maltreatment in the school. Given this prevailing circumstance, it would be natural to expect teachers feign ignorance about what constitutes psychological maltreatment in the classroom. School counsellors should be able to impress on teachers the fact that any behaviour ranging from scolding, verbal abuse of students, use of assignment/homework and so on, are incidents of psychological maltreatment which must be discarded. Impress on the teachers the need to treat students with all human dignity and respect. School counsellors should also be able to impress on government agencies in charge of education and youth development on the need to mount awareness campaigns in the form of seminars, workshops and conferences that would further enlighten the general public about what is and what is not psychological maltreatment in schools. This endeavour should also include how incidents of psychological maltreatment could be

promptly reported.

As Capuzzi and Gross (2001, as cited in Nesbit and Philpott, 2002) rightly observed, school counsellors today, discharge many functions in the school community. One of such functions is the membership of the professional development team in the school. By promoting strong reflective techniques among teachers, school counsellors would not only have helped to raise the awareness of psychological maltreatment, but also, assisted in making the classroom most conducive for students.

Another strategy school counsellors should also consider adopting in helping teachers from perpetuating psychological maltreatment in schools is what Nesbit and Philpott (2002) described as peer-mentorship model. This model could help veteran teachers and even novices to acquire reflective strategies with which to assess the impact of their words and actions that ordinarily would have amounted to psychological maltreatment.

REFERENCES

- Astor, R.A. and Meyer, H.A.: The conceptualization of violence prone school sub-contexts: Is the sum of parts greater than the whole? *Urban Education*, **36**: 374-399 (2001).
- Benbenishty, R., Zeira, A. and Astor, R.A.: Children's report of emotional, physical and sexual maltreatment by educational staff in Israel. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, **26**: 763-782 (2002).
- Benbenishty, R., Zeira, A., Astor, R.A. and Khoury-Kassabri, M.: Maltreatment of primary school students by educational staff in Israel. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, **26**: 1291-1309 (2002).
- Besharov, D.: *Recognizing Child Abuse*. The Free Press, New York (1990).
- Brown, S.E.: Social class, child maltreatment, and delinquent behavior. *Criminology*, **22**: 259-278 (1984).
- Capuzzi, D. and Gross, D.R.: *Introduction to the Counseling Profession*. 3rd Ed. Allyn & Bacon Boston, MA (2001).
- Dean, D.: Emotional abuse of children. *Children Today*, **8(4)**: 18-20 (1979).
- Geffner, R. and Robbie Rossman, B.B.: Emotional abuse: an emerging field of research and intervention. *Journal of Emotional Abuse*, **1(1)**: 1-5 (1998).
- Glaser, D.: Emotional abuse and neglect (psychological maltreatment): a conceptual framework. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, **26**: 697-714 (2002).
- Gootman, M.: Reaching and teaching abused children. *Childhood Education*, **70**: 15-18 (1993).
- Hart, S.N., Germain, R.B and Brassard, M. R.: The challenge: to better understand and control psychological maltreatment of children and youth. In: *Psychological Maltreatment of Children and Youth*. M.R. Brassard, R. Germain and S.N. Hart (Eds.). Pergamon Press, New York (1987).
- Hart, S.N., Binggeli, N.J. and Brassard, M. R.: Evidence for the effects of psychological maltreatment. *Journal of*

- Emotional Abuse*, **1(1)**: 27-58 (1998).
- Hoglund, C.L. and Nicholas, K.B.: Blame, guilt and anger in college students exposed to abusive family environments. *Journal of Family Violence*, **10(2)**: 141-159 (1995).
- Hyman, I. A. and Perone, D.C.: The other side of school violence: Educator policies and practices that may contribute to student misbehavior. *Journal of School Psychology*, **36**: 7-27 (1998).
- Hyman, I.A. and Snook, P.A.: *Dangerous Schools: What We can Do About the Physical and Emotional Abuse of Our Children*. Jossey Bass, San Francisco, CA (1999).
- Hyman, I.A. and Wise, J.I.: *Corporal Punishment in American Education*. Temple University Philadelphia, PA (1979).
- Hyman, I.A., Zelikoff, W. and Clarke, J.: Psychology and physical abuse in schools: a paradigm for understanding post traumatic stress disorder in children. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, **1**: 243-267 (1998).
- Imbrogno, A.R.: Corporal punishment in American public schools and the UN convention of the rights of the child: a case for non-ratification. *Journal of Law and Education*, **29**: 125-147 (2000).
- Kemp, A.: *Abuse in the Family: An Introduction*. Brooks/ Cole Publishing Company, Pacific Grove, CA (1998).
- Maggiolo, C.E.: Defining the unknown-Neglect. *Document Resume, Research Reports* (143), EDRS, ED420411 (1998).
- McEachern, A.G., Aluede, O. and Kenny, M.C. *Emotional Maltreatment in the Classroom: How School Counselor can Help*. Unpublished manuscript, Florida International University, Miami, USA (2003).
- Nesbit, W.C. and Philpott, D.F.: Confronting subtle emotional abuse in classrooms. *Guidance & Counselling*, **17(2)**: 32-38 (2002).
- O' Brian, C. and Lau, L.S.W.: Defining child abuse in Hong Kong. *Child Abuse Review*, **4**: 38-46 (1995).
- O'Hagan, K.P.: *Emotional and Psychological Abuse of Children*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Canada (1993).
- O' Hagan, K. P.: Emotional and psychological abuse: problems of distribution. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, **19**: 449-461 (1995).
- Pearlman, L.A.: Trauma and the self: a theoretical and clinical perspective. *Journal of Emotional Abuse*, **1(1)**: 7-26 (1998).
- Rohner, R.P. and Rohner, E.C.: Antecedents and consequences of parental rejection: a theory of emotional abuse. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, **4**: 189-198 (1980).
- Shumba, A.: The nature, extent and effect of emotional abuse on primary school pupils in Zimbabwe. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, **26**: 783-791 (2002).