

Students' nicknames: Their sources and effects on learning

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Abstract

There seems to be no end in sight for the practice of nicknaming amongst students. To address the nicknaming practice, it requires a better appreciation and understanding of the practice and its effects on the nicknamers. This study set out to fulfil this agenda. The study adopted descriptive survey design and used senior high school students as subjects. Semi-structured questionnaire was used to gather data for the study. The practice of nicknaming is still popular in the post modern world. Results of the study show a high prevalence (77.2%) of the practice among students with boys leading the practice. A disproportionate chunk of the male students (88.5%) had nicknames. It also emerged that negative nicknames have some psychological effects on the bearers which consequently discouraged them from active participation in class. There is, therefore, no gain saying that instructors ought to discourage students from this practice as it has the tendency to suppress and stifle students' participation in academic work. The implications of this development, certainly, are far-reaching and that educators' continuous entertainment of this practice is an indictment on their professionalism.

Keywords: Nicknames, sources, gender difference, effects, active participation, professionalism.

Introduction

In all cultural settings, every individual is accorded a name after birth, perhaps, to give a unique identity to the child. At birth, parents or senior members in a family give personal names to the new born baby which he/she may retain throughout his/her life (Mehrabian, & Piercy, 1993). As Aceto (2002) asserts, "true names" are acquired at birth through a culturally accepted arrangement. These names remain with a person though they can be changed either through a new status acquired by marriage or other circumstances. Brender (cited in Deluzain, 1996) avers that family tradition is an important factor in the names many children receive. It is unlikely for people outside a family would give real names to others on this universe. By the time a child becomes capable of going outside the home on their own, they have personal names which are used in all encounters.

Irrespective of the names given to children by their parents however, it is common to hear students being called some names other than their real names. Some of these nicknames have positive, neutral or negative connotations (Mehrabian, & Piercy, 1993). Certain nicknames are generally considered desirable and have positive feelings associated with them while others are humiliating and are looked down upon as being undesirable and carry negative associations. Nicknames that are deemed undesirable can have deleterious effects on the bearers' self-esteem, their learning and social relations. Anderson (1979) opines that nicknames have impact on the process of building a self-concept because the nickname helps determine the messages other people send the child. While some students love and cherish their nicknames, others hate and cannot stand theirs. This shows that not all nicknames are hostile; it may be deferential or signal membership of a friendship group (Wilson, 1998).

Statement of the Problem

It is an incontrovertible fact that nicknaming has been a common practice in many societies since ages. Researchers consequently have long studied the practice in various arenas of human endeavour and have observed that people use varieties of them. As far back as 1955, Shankle found that Americans used more nicknames than any other people. They gave nicknames to their wives, husbands, children, friends, and even enemies. No name was "too sacred or base for them to shorten or modify into some affectionate, humorous, or abusive sobriquet; they could be complimentary or satirical" (p5). Afful (2007) also contends that address forms which include nicknames are used in various social domains in Ghana such as politics, workplace and academia. Studies have flagged variations in students' nicknames and that students have nicknames that permeate all aspects of human endeavour (Crozier & Dimmock, 1999, De Klerk & Bosch, 1997). All sorts of nicknames are used by people in different environments.

While some people may cherish fad names and would like to be identified with them, some may abhor and shy away from theirs. Although nicknaming has been a common practice in Ghanaian educational institutions for years, it has really not garnered the attention of educational researchers and educators to investigate its effects on the bearers. Globally also, the effects of nicknames have apparently not gained research attention although some aspects of the phenomenon have been investigated thoroughly. Thus, some aspects of this palpable practice have been scientifically and systematically investigated: sources of nicknames (Liao, 2000, 2006), reasons for nicknaming (Kiesling, 1997, De Klerk & Bosch, 1998), and gender differences in nicknaming (Liao, 2006, Kiesling, 1997).

There is, however, dearth of knowledge on the effects nicknaming has on students' self-concept and their morale in learning. There is also paucity of data on the popularity of nicknaming in the 21st century when students are expected to be pre-occupied with academic work in order to have a successful future as education is the key now.

Objectives of the study

The study sought to delve into the practice of nicknaming among students to introduce a cultural dimension (study conducted in Ghana) to it. Specifically, the study intended to unearth the prevalence of nicknaming practice in the Senior High School, gender difference in the practice and the effects it has on student learning.

Research questions

The questions that needed answers are: how popular is the phenomenon of nicknaming in the senior high schools? what are the sources of students' nicknames? is there gender difference in the nicknaming practice? and what effect do nicknames have on the bearers?

Literature and Sources

The concept of nickname

Phillips (1990) defines a nickname as a subset of informal or unfixed names for someone, usually addressed by acquaintances. He posits that since such names are unofficial, only familiar people call the nicknamed by those names. Liao (2006) also interprets a nickname as an informal name that is not registered at the Civil Registration Office in Taiwan. Alleton (1981) and Blum (1997) directly translate nicknames into "little names" (*xiao-ming*) or "milk names" (*ru-ming*) and consider such names as minor names that are not the official names of the nicknamed.

Fang and Heng (1983) have a similar view of nickname and consider it as a milk name which is only used within the family or among intimate friends. On his part, Hsiao-ching (2008) defines a nickname as an informal term for an individual, often used by the members in a particular community of practice. He postulates that nicknames are often developed among acquaintances and that most nicknames represent familiarity, intimacy and solidarity. Although nicknames are used by members in familiar groups, others outside the community of practice can also be attracted to use such names to address the name bearers. This makes the assertion of nicknames addressed by only members of a community of practice arguable. In schools, nicknames of students are used by not only members of a community of practice but those outside the domain as well.

Gender differences in nicknaming

It is observed that nicknaming researchers have shown considerable interest in gender differences in the practice. They have sought to ascertain the gender that is highly associated with the nicknaming practice. This social issue is probably based on the premise that male and female children behave differently in social discourse which can reflect in this practice. Males are vociferous and do not fear public ridicule unlike their female counterparts who are very sensitive to what happens to them in public. McConnel-Ginet (2005) opines that more males have nicknames than females. This assertion is corroborated by Liao (2006) study that found a high frequency of nicknaming practices among males. In a Graduation Memory Album of Feng Dong Junior High School, it was reported that 119 out of 152 (78.29%) females had nicknames while 131 of 142 (91.61%) male students had nicknames. The study disclosed that only three out of eight classes in which all of the students, either female or male, had nicknames. In the rest of the classes, more males had nicknames than the females. Similarly, Kiesling (1997) study on verbal practices in an American College fraternity showed that joking and insults were commonly used by male students more than their female counterparts to reinforce heterosexuality. Kiesling study, however, fell short of ascertaining the effects that the negative nicknames had on the bearers' self-concept and their learning.

A study on nicknaming practices among university students in Taiwan, however, did not corroborate the above findings. The study found that nicknaming practice was more frequently implemented in all-female groups as it

was with the all-male groups (Hsiao-Ching, 2008). The results of the study demonstrate that both male and female students in the institution took delight in the practice and had some nicknames.

It is unequivocal that the issue of which gender dominates the practice is inconclusive as different researchers have yielded different results. The variance of the results on which sexes is noted for this practice opens the floodgate for further studies to be done on it in different cultural milieu to ascertain the global picture of the practice.

Sources of nicknames

Apparently, various sources have been identified for nicknames. Morgan, O'Neill, and Harre (1979) contend that nicknames can be understood in four fashions: norm, social control, status, and insult. A study also found that students used personal names, descriptive phrases and titles to address themselves. The titles used as addressed terms included both westernised and non-westernised ones (Afful, 2007). It is observed that some nicknames emanate from real-names of the bearers while some are descriptions of personal features of the nicknamed. The nicknames may describe the persons' facial appearance, skin colour, their ability, their figure or the opposite quality which may be mocking. Yang (1991) asserts that a nickname reflects a person's impression of the nicknamed. If a person is nicknamed *Chang-she fu*, it means the woman is having a long tongue. Again, the size of one's body can earn him/her a nickname. Fat and slim people are accorded nicknames that proportionate their body sizes.

In a study, Liao (2006) identified two nicknaming patterns in Taiwan namely real-names and personal feature nicknames. The study unveiled that some nicknames were developed from or related to the bearers' real or formal names. Some real names were also modified into an affectionate, humorous, or abusive sobriquet. Further, the study disclosed that some of the nicknames were clear descriptions of their personal features. The Liao's study, however, did not investigate which of these categories of nickname sources had negative effects on the bearers.

It is also observed that some nicknames are given to students due to abilities, special skill or quality being possessed by the students. Students who exhibit dexterity, ingenuity and creativity in class are called by their peers as "sharp brain", "shark" etc which all seek to describe the styling abilities of the students concerned. It is expected that nicknames that seem to portray the styling abilities of students would encourage the bearers to fully participate in class unlike those that have the tendency to ridicule, scorn and demean the nicknamed. It would be expected that in classes where students' exceptional and unprecedented contributions to discussions earn them nicknames and their concomitant popularity students would be inspired to fully and actively participate in academic work.

Reasons for nicknaming

Literature is replete with reasons for students giving nicknames to others. It is realised that some nicknames are used to identify the person's group membership, show group solidarity, in-group relationship and a signal membership in a friendship group (Wilson, 1998). Kiesling (1998) found in a study that nicknames were used as address terms among the American students in a fraternity in the college; it was used as a solidarity term and an identity maker of an in-group. To Thornborrow (2004), nicknaming represents a process of constructing individual identity within a group. Members of a group may have some unique names they identify themselves with.

De Klerk and Bosch (1998) associate nickname formation with linguistic creativity and verbal playfulness and interpret the pervasive use of nicknames among students as indexical of peer group membership and peer cohesion. Bergers (1993) regards nicknaming as a language technique that shows a sense of humour comprising allusion, facetiousness, insults, sarcasm etc.

Effects of nicknames

Identifying people with names other than their real names has the tendency to negatively or positively affect the bearers of fake names. Anderson (1979) postulates that nicknames have impact on the process of building a self-concept because the nicknames help determine the messages other people send the bearers. Sharifah (1998) found in a study that majority of the students had positive self-concept because of the good relationship between them and the students around them. Implicit in this issue is that if students do not feel comfortable with the people around them they tend to develop negative self-concept which can have dire consequences on them.

Smith (1967) posits that the style of names people choose for themselves reveals a great deal about their personality and about how they see themselves. To him, nicknames create certain impressions about the bearers of those names. It is reasoned that nicknames can affect the way people behave and how they feel about

themselves. It is, therefore, expedient for all to be concerned with helping students develop positive self-concept to enable them learn effectively. All acts that seem to thwart this effort need not be countenance in schools.

Methodology

Research design

The study adopted descriptive sample survey design which is a form of quantitative approach of research. Sample survey design entails gathering data in order to test hypotheses or answer questions concerning the current status of the subject of study (Gay, 1992). Descriptive survey offers researchers the opportunity to gain valuable insight and better understanding of the phenomenon being studied. This design was employed for the study because it was deemed appropriate to achieve the purpose of the study and draw meaningful conclusions.

Population and sample

The target population was the senior high school students while the accessible population was the students of ten (10) senior high schools in the Brong Ahafo region of Ghana. The region is abound with numerous senior high schools that admit students from all walks of life from different parts of the country. It therefore provided an ideal setting for such a socio-cultural study. Multi-stage sampling technique was relied on to select the subjects for the study. Five districts were randomly sampled and two Senior High Schools were selected in each district. In each of the schools, the students were stratified into two: male and female groups and five percent (5%) of the students in each stratum in each school was randomly selected to constitute the sample for the exercise. Simple random sampling technique was then employed purposely to give every student an equal chance of being selected. This process yielded a sample of 430 students who were finally used in the study.

Instrument

Due to the nature of the respondents, SHS Nicknaming Questionnaire (SHSNQ) was developed and used as the instrument to gather data for the study. The instrument was peer reviewed by some colleagues to check its validity. The items on the questionnaire were both close and open ended. In all, 430 questionnaires were administered and 422 of them were returned. It was observed that six (6) of them were not properly and completely filled and hence were rejected. This reduced the sample size to 416 subjects.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data collected was statistically analysed. Data entries and analysis were done by the use of Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 16. The completed questionnaires were critically scrutinized and coded before the data was entered into the computer. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data. The results of the data analysis are presented in tables for easy reference and discussion.

Results and Discussion

The thrust of the study was to investigate the use of nicknames among students. The results of the rate of usage of nicknames are presented in table 1.

Table 1: Usage of nicknames

Response	Freq.	Percent
Yes	321	77.2
No	95	22.8
Total	416	100

The results in Table 1 show clearly that majority of the selected students have one nickname or the other. Out of the 416 students, 321 (77.2%) of them indicated that they had nicknames while only 95 (22.8%) of them did not have one. The results mean that the rate of nicknaming among the students is high. The high prevalence of this development is not a good idea for students at this stage of development where they are supposed to adopt and practice virtues essential for learning and good life. Intrinsicly, students in the formative years are required to learn attitudes and behaviours that are pre-requisite for fruitful productive adulthood and acceptable life.

The study also sought to find out the rate of usage of nicknames among male and female students in the senior high school. It purported to find out whether both male and female students in their adolescent stage have nicknames as other studies have established elsewhere. Table 2 presents the results of gender differences in students' nicknames.

Table 2: Gender differences in students' nicknames

Gender	Yes		No	
	Freq.	Percent	Freq.	Percent
Male	184	88.5	24	11.5
Female	137	65.9	71	34.1

The results indicate that while 88.5 % of the male students have nicknames, 65.9% of the female students have one. This means that more of the boys had nicknames than the girls. This finding corroborates Kiesling (1997) and Liao (2006) studies which revealed that more boys than girls have nicknames. The gender difference may be attributed to the fact that male students tend to exhibit more aggressiveness or interruptive behaviours than female students (Brooks, 1983). Male students also have the tendency to demonstrate flashes of brilliance and pomposity in school than their female cohorts in most times.

Sources of nicknames

An aspect of the nicknaming practice worth studying was where the nicknames emanate. The sources of students' nicknames were explored in the study. The findings are presented in table 3.

Table 3: Sources of students' nicknames

Source	Response	
	Frequency	Percent
Real names	20	6.2
Personal feature	80	24.9
Students' abilities	54	16.8
Mistakes committed in class	120	37.5
Others	47	14.6
Total	321	100

The results in table 3 demonstrate that majority of the nicknamed 120 (37.5%) have their fad names from mistakes they committed in class. Students claimed that if they mispronounce words, get answers wrong, and fail to respond to teachers' questions correctly, their colleagues give them nicknames. The results also show that a good number of the respondents' nicknames, 80 (24.9%), are personal feature based. Some of this source of nicknames described the skin colour, body size and heights of the bearers. This implies that about a quarter of the nicknames are personal feature based. This development is very disheartening as it could make students look mean on themselves.

Surprisingly, some of the descriptions were apparent contradictions of the actual features of the bearers of the nicknames. For instance, a very thin chap was nicknamed Oboolo (fat) and a very dark lass was addressed as Obronni (a white person). The nickname bearers claimed that this contradictory scenario was ostensibly to make mockery of them and it affected their social relation. This development certainly has serious implications for students' sociability in school, one of the core functions of education. Since students, as human beings, are gregarious and work ethos as well as other societal activities demand interpersonal relationship, the school is tasked to consciously imbibe good human relationship in students. Any practice that tends to wreck this effort should be a source of worry to all stakeholders of education. Further, it is realised in the study that the other sources of the nicknames were based on the nicknamed real names, their special abilities and others which did not have adverse effects on them.

Effects of nicknames on students

In the study, the respondents were requested to indicate the effects that their nicknames had on them. The respondents whose nicknames emanated from their personal features reported that they felt humiliated and embarrassed when their colleagues addressed them by such names. They intimated that because their classmates hilariously and comically scream and shout their nicknames when they contributed to discussions, whether they were right or wrong, they found it extremely difficult to participate fully in class.

Similarly, those whose nicknames emanated from the mistakes they committed in class indicated that their class participation had been very minimal since then. They claimed that they abstained from class contributions in

order to avoid more frosty nicknames. Their inability to participate in instructions stems from the fact that they would be given nicknames if they made mistakes. The proviso in effective teaching and learning is students' active participation in class and discussions. This has prompted the adoption of teaching methods that require students to be active players in the learning process. In the contemporary times, instructors are departing from didactic teaching to more interactive teaching where students can take active role in the teaching and learning process.

It was, however, realised in the study that nicknames that evince sobriety, decorum and styling abilities did not warrant complaints. Such nicknames could be entertained in class since they do not have adverse effects on the bearers and their morale in learning activities. Those whose nicknames were based on their real names also approved of them. This is probably because the nicknames might have come from the bearers themselves.

Conclusion

The study has amply demonstrated that nicknaming is a common practice in the study area as it is in most countries. The high prevalence (77.2%) of this phenomenon in the senior high schools with boys spearheading is partly due to lack of attention paid to it by educational authorities. Meanwhile the practice has deleterious effects on students' academic activities. Teachers in particular seem to sit aloof for students to nickname others with mistakes committed in class. This is a practice with the potency to discourage students from expressing their views, seeking clarifications and answering questions in class. Meanwhile to be successful in learning, students ought to be given the opportunities to form their identities, express themselves and actively participate in class and group discussions. Clearly, the quest to develop students' ability to contribute meaningful to discussions to engender effective learning will be a mirage if this practice is not suppressed, if it cannot be stopped entirely, by instructors.

The reasons for the gender differences in aggressive behaviour of students are yet to be studied. Until such a time that the causes are unearthed and addressed, educators need to be vigilant on boys to ensure that discipline and sanity prevail in schools and classrooms to promote effective learning. Educators have no option than to take pragmatic steps to find antidote to this palpable issue that is having psychological effects on the nicknamed as well as their learning activities.

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