Original Article

The current situation of school bullying among secondary school students in Da Nang city, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Bullying in schools is often regarded as one of the most serious problems facing educational systems around the world, particularly in developing countries. The term "school bullying" refers to a variety of abusive behaviors that take place inside the context of an educational institution, as well as hostile behaviors that take place among school-age children. These abusive behaviors present themselves in a variety of violent acts at various degrees, ranging from verbal to nonverbal, from simple to hostile, aggressive, and destructive actions, all of which have the potential to cause harm to others. The findings of this study, which was conducted on a sample of 978 secondary school students from across the city of Da Nang, Vietnam, were used to assess the causes of and preventative methods for school bullying. Approximately 19.1 percent of children report experiencing school violence 2-4 times per year; 27.5 percent report experiencing more than five times per year, and 6.4 percent report experiencing more than ten times per year.

Keywords: Response measure, School bullying, Secondary school students, Abusive behaviors

Introduction

An educational institution is responsible for creating a communicative environment to facilitate students' positive personal and academic growth where their safety and equality are ensured [1]. However, it has been pointed out by Skrzypiec et al. (2011) [2] that school bullying is threatening such establishments; and there have been more and more records of peer-on-peer abuse cases that require immediate responses [3-7].

Totura et al. (2009) defined school bullying as destructive behaviors that affect one's mental (emotion, perception, and behavior) and physical health [8]. It can also be defined as any abusive actions intended to cause injury or harm toward another person [9]. Mac (2016); Moral et al. (2014); Nguyen (2016) defined school bullying as acts of aggression towards other people that harm them. School bullying can be expressed in different forms: direct and indirect physical violence [4-6]; cyberbullying [9]; direct or indirect verbal attacks [10]; and social exclusion [11].

Research by Pham (2009) claimed that 36% of secondary school students said that they were engaged in bullying quarrels during a school year [12]. Another research by Nguyen (March 14, 2015) showed that nearly 90% of 3rd to 6th graders at least once were bullied by their classmates, and up to 59% of students admitted that they bullied their peers [13].

Researchers have documented adolescent's common responses towards bullying: seeking help from adults; handling the problem by themselves; pretending nothing happened; ignoring the problem, telling others about it; dealing with it internally (crying, tormenting, etc.) [2]; or submitting to their abusers [14]; seeking assistance [15]. Yet, a few students responded by self-concealing, retaliating, reporting directly to law enforcement, or complaining with certain people about the bully Mendes (2011) [16], or calling the police [17]. Other

researchers, namely Mayer and Leone (2007) [1]; Rigby (2020) [18]; Smith (2013) concluded that the victims feel helpless confronting their abusers [17].

Research findings by Dobarro (2011) [19]; Nguyen-Thi *et al.* (2014) [20]; Pérez-Fuentes *et al.* (2011) [21]; Totura *et al.* (2009) [8] showed the negative correlation between academic performance and violent behaviors, that is, students with violent behaviors had poor academic performance, and academic performance of those suffering from bullying was also negatively affected as well. Research by López-Castedo *et al.* (2018) [22] on 4,943 students from 33 public and private schools suggested classroom quarrels, peer-to-peer verbal attacks, and students of different backgrounds (gender, grade level, and academic achievements) perceived violence differently. Nguyen-Thi (2016) also claimed that female students are more likely to endure peer-to-peer abuse than their male counterparts [23].

Regarding the causes, Pachter *et al.* (2010) suggested that increasing school bullying is caused by racism and discrimination among students [11]. Vu (2015) believed children raised in a hostile family environment are more likely to be violent than harmonious families [24]. Meanwhile, Hoang (2015) concluded that an insecure environment and social skill deficits would be significant causes of school bullying [25].

Preventative measures proposed by Nickerson and Martens (2008) demonstrated that there should be joint efforts among all aspects of security, education, therapy, and family [7]. Nguyen and Nguyen (2020) believed that to tackle school bullying efficiently, psychological intervention should be provided to each student individually in terms of his behaviors, thoughts, attitudes, and perception of school violence [26]. Meanwhile, Nguyen (2016) identified two primary interventions for school bullying: controlling and supervising school and classroom environments and family environments [6].

Jiménez-Barbero *et al.* (2016) acknowledged the importance of appropriate anti-bullying programs at schools that aim towards a safe, healthy, and constructive academic environment in reducing the frequency of bullying significantly [27]. Other researchers, namely Ananiadou and Smith (2002); Cross *et al.* (2004); Mateo *et al.* (2009) also studied intervention measures to reduce direct acts of violence such as punching, kicking, or teasing [28-30].

Hence, we believe that there should be guidance to help students deal with violence before or while violence happens to them. In this article, we present some research findings on measures to respond to school violence of secondary school students in Da Nang city, Viet Nam.

Materials and Methods

Participants

A sample of 978 students participated in the survey by completing an electronic questionnaire comprising 351 male students (accounted for 35.9%) and 627 female students (accounted for 64.1%). These students were selected evenly from five secondary schools and four grade levels (about 24-25%) and a total of 19-20% students from each school). Within the last year, from May 2020 to May 2021, the students experiencing no violence is 26.1%; those suffering violence for 1-2 times is 19.1%; those with more than 2-4 times, over five times and over ten times are 19.1%, 27.5%, and 6.4% respectively.

Table 1. Overview of survey participants

	n	%
Gender		
Male	351	35.9
Female	627	64.1
Experiencing violence (within the previous year)		
No violence	255	26.1
1-2 times	187	19.1
Over two times	204	20.9
Over five times	269	27.5
Over ten times	63	6.4
School		
Ly Thuong Kiet Secondary School	189	19.3
Pham Ngoc Thach Secondary School	195	19.9
Nguyen Thi Hong Gam Secondary School	195	19.9
Le Lai Secondary School	197	20.1
Le Van Tam Secondary School	202	20.7
Grade		
Grade 6	250	25.6
Grade 7	242	24.7
Grade 8	243	24.8
Grade 9	243	24.8
Academic result		
Weak/Poor	10	1.0
Average	152	15.5
Fair	474	48.5
Good	340	34.8
Excellent	2	.2
Residence		
Not living with parents	126	12.9
Living with parent	333	34.0
Living with parent and sibling	519	53.1
Family economic background		
Poor (less than 250$/month)	147	15.0
Lower middle-income (250-500$/month)	553	56.5
Middle-income (500-1000$/month)	241	24.6
Upper-income (over 1000$/month)	37	3.9

n: Number of participants; %: Percentage.

Among the participants, students with excellent academic results are only 0.2% had achievements while those with good, average, and poor results were 34.8%, 48.5%, and 1%, respectively. Students living with their parents and siblings

accounted for 53.1%, while 34% live with only one parent. Also, 12.9% of students live with other family members/legal guardians who are not their biological parents (grandparents, siblings, or relatives). The students self-evaluated their family financial status: Upper-income families (3.8%, with over 1000$/month), Middle-income (24.6%, with 500-1000$/month), Lower middle-income (56.5%, with 250-500$/month), and poor (15%, less than 250$/month).

Measure

We developed two different questionnaires to collect data from students: the first one by Nguyen (2014) was bout school bullying signs and preventative measures [31]; the second one by Chen and Astor (2011) inquired about perception on causes of bullying in school [32].

The first questionnaire by Nguyen (2014) consists of 4 question groups, including [31]:

1. *Question group 1*: Students' general information: Gender, grade level, school, academic performance, family status (living with parents or not), family economic background (upper income/middle income/lower middle income/poor), and experience of bullying acts during the academic year.
2. *Question group 2*: Evaluation of suffering from bullying acts over one year (12 items);
3. *Question group 3*: Assumed causes for being the victim of bullying acts (18 items).
4. *Question group 4*: Responses towards bullies (rationally, sentimentally, or physically) with 49 items, using the 5-point Likert scale:
   - 0 = Never true
   - 1 = Rarely true
   - 2 = Occasionally true
   - 3 = Usually true
   - 4 = Always true
5. *Question group 5*: Measures to deal with school bullying (16 items) with three levels of necessity:
   - 0 = Not necessary at all
   - 1 = Necessary
   - 2 = Extremely necessary

The second questionnaire by Chen and Astor (2011) on possible causes of school bullying contains nine items [32]: Attitude towards violence; Ability to control impulsive behaviors; Quick-temper; Parents' supervision; Lack of respect for school discipline and regulations; Impression about school; Problematic relationship with friends; Victims of violence; and Witness of violence, using the 5-point Likert scale 1 to 5, as below:
   - 1 = Never
   - 2 = Rarely
   - 3 = Occasionally
   - 4 = Usually
   - 5 = Always

Analysis

Participants who agreed to participate signed informed consent and then completed the questionnaire. The ethics committee approved the research of the University of Da Nang, University of Science and Education, Da Nang city, Viet Nam. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20 was used for data analyses. The coding procedure was performed as follows:

   - 1 = very low
   - 2 = Below average
   - 3 = Average
   - 4 = Above Average
   - 5 = Very high.

According to Narli (2010), the interval width of the 5-point Likert scale should be computed to set up the group boundary value for result discussion [33]. Interval width = (upper value - lower value)/n = (5-1)/5 = 0.8. Group boundary values are built that help to discuss research based on the above interval width, which is pointed in **Table 2**.

Results and Discussion

The investigation into the current circumstance of school bullying (with 12 items and Cronbach Alpha of 0.851) in the three categories of mental abuse, physical abuse, and material abuse shed light on the dominance of mental abuse among bullying cases. Commonly experienced offenses that fall under this category include, but are not limited to: "I am wrongly accused, slandered, and threatened to disclose personal information" (M=2.88); "I am excluded from class activities, friend circles, and ignored intentionally" (M=2.88); "My friends misled others about me, so they blamed, disliked, and deliberately avoided me" (M=2.83); "I am called insulting names and ridiculed in public or in front of friends" (M=2.80).

The results of the T-Test for genders and offensive behaviors showed that there is a similarity in violent acts that both female and male students experienced, namely being slandered and blackmailed (M=2.87, p < 0.05). However, there is a difference between the two genders in terms of being forced to buy things: male students are forced to buy things more than their female counterparts; male students' books and learning equipment (M= 2.97) are intentionally damaged more than those of females (M =2.74).

The Anova test was used to analyze the relationship between school bullying victims and their grade levels; academic performance, and family status, which showed that there is no significant difference in the incidence of being bullied (p > 0.05), which means any student can be at risk of school bullying.

We also studied the causes of school bullying (with 18 items, Cronbach Alpha score of 0.860). The most prominent cause is gender bias (i.e. "Being a female is a cause", with M = 2.90); followed by "Showing affections for classmates of opposite sex"

(M = 2.88); "Being popular among friends or in groups" (M = 2.86); "Being favored by teachers for excellent academic performance" (M = 2.84); and "Being academically recognized by people with positions envied by the bully" (M= 2.83). In addition, other causes are "Being students with learning difficulties" (unfamiliarity with new school environments or developmental disorder); "Students' personalities such as arrogance, selfishness"; or "Being interested in by friends of the opposite sex"; or "Being active in shared work", etc.

Table 2. Causes of being bullied at school.

	M	SD	R
Object			
I am a female student	2.90	.73	1
I show affections for a friend of the opposite sex	2.88	.72	2
I am popular in groups or among friends	2.86	.73	3
I am favored by teachers for my excellent academic performance	2.84	.84	4
I am recognized academically by the people with positions envied by the bully	2.83	.85	5
Causes for being a bully			
Capacity to control impulsive acts	2.83	1.54	1
Quick-temper	2.67	1.47	2
Parents' supervision	2.66	1.41	3
Victims of violence	2.61	1.36	4
Problematic relationships with friends	2.60	1.40	5

M: Mean; SD: Standard Deviation; R: Ranking.

We studied the causes of students' violence [32] using nine items with Cronbach's Alpha score of .808. The cause ranked the first is "I find it difficult to control my impulsive acts" (M = 2.67), followed by "I am quick-tempered" (M = 2.88). Next is "Lack of parents' supervision" (M = 2.86), followed by "I used to be bullied" and "I often help friends" (M = 2.84). The cause ranked fifth is "I have problematic friendships" (M = 2.60). Besides, there are other causes such as "I never comply with school regulations"; "I have a negative impression on the school"; "I think violence is a natural way to handle problems"; and "I used to witness violent acts".

Among the 16 items in the questionnaire regarding preventative measures rated by middle school students (credibility score of 0.814), the numbers suggested that students mostly confide in means such as establishing a consulting office for students to express their concerns (M = 2.23) freely; installing a hotline to report bullying incidents (M = 2.20); requesting coaching respecting self-assertion skills (M = 2.19) or similar skillsets to repel against their abusers (M = 2.17).

The results of responses towards school bullying (16 items, Cronbach Alpha score of .814) showed that most survey respondents selected such measures as "School builds a counseling room for us to share our problems" (M = 2.23); "School sets up a hotline to prevent bullying at school" (M = 2.20); "Students need to be taught self-affirmation skills" (M =

2.19); and "Students need to be taught self-defense skills against the bully" (M = 2.17).

Table 3. Opinions on preventative measures against school bullying.

	M	SD	R
School builds a counseling office for students to share their problems	2.23	.83	1
School sets up a hotline to prevent bullying at school	2.20	.84	2
Students need to be taught self-affirmation skills	2.19	.75	3
Students need to be taught self-defense skills against the bully	2.17	.85	4
Teachers should interact friendly with each other	2.15	.84	5

M: Mean; SD: Standard Deviation; R: Ranking.

The quantitative results in **Table 1** present an alarming rate of 73.9% of students bullied by their peers in the last academic year, in which 31.9% suffered more than five times (being bullied every 2-3 months). This finding indicates that school bullying is alarmingly severe, and preventive measures need to be proposed.

Table 1 also singled out mental abuses as the dominant form of school bullying through specific acts like being slandered, misled, falsely blamed; or take away personal belongings, buying foods against their will, etc. This finding also shows that the rate of students experiencing verbal attacks is currently at its highest level.

Regarding causes for being bullied, the primary cause was gender issues **(Table 3)** which confused us. We wonder if students have to suffer the long-lasting perception of "respect for males and disrespect for females" in Vietnamese society. A student, L.N.K., from Ly Thuong Kiet secondary school, shared her thoughts: "*I think girls are more likely to be bullied than boys because of differences in our physical and emotional attributes. We girls tend to stay quiet and try to tolerate any abuses, while boys tend to have more advantages and power in expressing themselves*".

Regarding the causes of being a bully, among the nine possible causes [32], the cause ranked the first is failure to control one's impulsive acts or quick-temper, followed by being a victim previously or witnessing violent acts. These findings made us think that there should be measures to reduce violent behaviors of the bully and their victims.

Preventative measures against school bullying for secondary school students suggested by themselves are: school needs to establish counseling offices, hotlines, and self-defense coaching courses as part of the curriculum. A student, T.L.Y, said, "*I think the school should establish counseling room for us to share our problems*"; Another student, L.A.Q, said, "*I believe that school should develop a code of conduct for students to comply and coordinate with student' families to timely intervene*".

In short, we find that school bullying exists in all surveyed schools. Their causes are related to cultural norms of Vietnamese people (stereotypical gender roles; students' affections for classmates of the opposite sex). Regarding causes of being a bully, failure to control impulsive acts, and victims of violence themselves or witnessing violent acts are significant causes. Therefore, we are interested in implementing measures

to prevent school bullying for secondary school students in the upcoming time.

Conclusion

School bullying is currently a problem for each school and the community and the world. It is expanding its circumstantial context in multiple aspects from levels of impact to means of protection, which calls for intervention from all members of the society. Students should be responsible for their self-protection and maintaining a healthy pursuit of knowledge. School/Teachers should be accountable for implementing necessary counseling offices, life skills coaching courses, and conduct codes to produce a secure and enthusiastic environment for their students. The optimal result also requires cooperation from students' parents in the noble cause of education using their rich life experiences to nurture their children's comprehensive growth.

School bullying encompasses many aspects, namely the current situation of violence, forms of bullying, causes for bullying and being bullied, impacts, and preventative measures. This research could only portray an incomplete fraction of the overall picture of school bullying in 5 secondary schools in Da Nang. In the upcoming time, further research on different cultures and societal factors on a transnational level is highly encouraged to construct a reliable reference to the findings in this paper.

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