**Original Article**

# An Investigation into Causes of Violence at Secondary Schools in Da Nang, Vietnam

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## ABSTRACT

*Provide an overview of violence at secondary schools in Da Nang city, Viet Nam, and an analysis of its causes. An online questionnaire is a cross-sectional study on 978 secondary school students (from grades 6 to 9) from March to April 2021. The rate of school violence (during last year) was: 73.9% students experienced bullying; those experienced from 1-2 times were 19.1% while others experienced from 3-5 times (accounted for 20.9%), from 6-10 times (accounted for 27.5%), and over ten times (accounted for 6.4%). The rate of students suffering from mental violence was the highest, with 76.4%. There were no significant differences between factors like genders, grades, schools, and violence, or being bullied. Regarding causes of bullying, students' inability to control impulsiveness, hot-temper, and witnesses of violence were significant causes. There should be joint efforts between schools and families regarding concerns about victims or witnesses of violence. From a psychological-educational perspective, such activities as school counseling, problem-solving skills, and self-defense coaching should be organized to help students deal with school bullying. Further research could be conducted on the correlation between academic pressure and bullying, family relationships and violent incidents, etc. It is also recommended that families support their children emotionally and share with them about issues in life to recognize and prevent school bullying timely.*

**Key words:** *School bullying, Causes of violence, Secondary school students, Bully-victims, Problem-solving skills*

## INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], school violence and violence among youngsters aged 13-15 have affected 150 million children worldwide in terms of their studies [1]. In addition, there are about 150 million students worldwide experiencing violence by their peers in and outside the school campus. Research by Plan International and the International Center for Research on Women [ICRW] on 9000 students aged 12-17, teachers, principals, parents, etc. in 5 countries (i.e. Cambodia, Viet Nam, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Nepal), conducted from 10/2013 to 3/2014, showed that school violence in Asia is at an alarming rate (with 7/10 students suffering from bullying) [2]. Among them, the country with the highest rate of students experiencing violence was Indonesia (accounted for 84%), while Pakistan had the lowest rate (accounted for 43%). Modecki *et al*.'s (2014) research findings from 80 studies on school children conducted in non-Asian countries showed that direct and cyber violence rates were 36% and 16%, respectively [3].

In the six months of the research period (10/2013-3/2014), the number of students suffering from violence (in all forms: mental, physical, etc.) in Indonesia was 75%, followed by Viet Nam with 71% [4]. Research by Le-Thi (2017) on secondary and high school students in Ha Noi and Hai Duong showed that the rates of students suffering from violence and cyber violence were 43.5% and 11.9%, respectively, in the past six months [5]. Researchers have studied: (1) the theoretical basis of school bullying; (2) the current situation of school bullying; (3) factors affecting school bullying; (4) consequences of school bullying; and (5) measures to prevent, intervene and stop school bullying. In particular:

Research by Tran-Thi (2010) showed that school violence is terrible behavior, affecting the body and psychology (emotions, cognition, behavior) [6]. According to Kim *et al*. (2016), violence or violence is any behavior intended to cause harm or injury to another person [7], while Eitle and Eitle (2003) defined violence as aggressive acts causing harm to other people [8]. Regarding types of bullying, Chen and Wei (2013); Dang and Tran (2011) classified violence into physical bullying, mental bullying, cyberbullying, direct or indirect verbal attack, relational bullying, and property extortion bullying [9, 10].

Regarding causes of school bullying, Pachter *et al*. (2010) suggested racism and discrimination among students is the leading cause [11]; whereas, Hoang and Dang-Thi (2016) believed that conflictive child-parent relationships result in the child's act of violence [12]. Hoang (2015) indicated that the child's unsecured social environment and lack of life skills are significant causes of bullying [13]. However, Chen and Astor (2011) suggested, from the bully's perspective, the ability to control impulsiveness, parents' supervision, and quick-temper are major causes [14]; meanwhile, from the perspectives of those who are bullied, Nguyen (2014) concluded that students are more likely to be bullied once their teachers favor them; outstanding in-class activities [15]; or assisting other students frequently, etc. Huang, Tran-Chi, and Hsiao (2018) discovered that fourth-grade Vietnamese children's self-control (self-management) capacity was much higher than that of the second and sixth graders [16].

Regarding measures to handle school bullying, Skrzypiec *et al*. (2011) recommended several measures, namely [17]: seek for help from adults, handling the problem by themselves, pretending nothing happened; ignoring the problem, telling others about the problem; dealing with it internally (crying, tormenting, etc.). In Viet Nam, students handle violence by seeking help from their friends [18] or submitting to their abusers [19]. Meanwhile, international researchers have documented many responses to bullying, e.g. self-concealing, fighting back, reporting the bully to people in charge like teachers or student managers [20], and reporting the bully to the police [21].

Regarding measures to prevent school bullying, Beci (1992) recommended a joint effort from aspects of security, education, therapy, and family [22]. Other researchers suggested a variety of preventive methods, namely psychological intervention to students individually in terms of their behaviors, thoughts, attitudes, and perception of violence [15]; controlling and supervising school and classroom environments, and family environment [4], coaching programs on measures to prevent violence [23].

Many researchers, having studied school intervention measures, recommended that schools build a safe, healthy academic environment and anti-violence programs to reduce the frequency of violence significantly. In Viet Nam, the Decree No. 80/2017/NĐ-CP by the Prime Minister dated July 17, 2017, namely "Regulations on the safe, healthy, friendly environment to prevent and combat school bullying", has been the very first decree to cover the issue of school violence prevention and combat directly [24]. Therefore, research on school violence and its causes to propose feasible preventive measures are significantly important. In this paper, school violence is defined as students suffering/experiencing any mental/physical or material abusing behaviors caused by their peers; school violence acts are understood as students attempting to cause mental/physical harm or material damages to their peers. This paper describes research results on 978 secondary students in Da Nang and proposes measures to reduce school bullying.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

*Participants*

This research was conducted from March to April 2021 in 5 secondary schools in Da Nang. There were 180 to 200 students aged 11-14, grades 6 to 9, participating in the research in each school.

A sample of 978 students participated and completed the questionnaire, who were 351 male students (accounted for 35.9%) and 627 female students (accounted for 64.1%) from 5 secondary schools in Danang. Regarding their academic performance, students with excellent academic results are only .2%, while those with good, fair, average, and poor results are 34.8%, 48.5%, 15.5%, and 1%, respectively. Students living with their parents and

siblings are accounted for 53.1%, while 34% live with only one parent. Also, 12.9% of students live with other family members/legal guardians (grandparents, siblings, or relatives). The students self-evaluate their family financial status as follows: Upper-income families (3.8%, with over 25 million VND/month), Middle-income (24.6%, with 15-25 million VND/month), Lower middle-income (56.5%, with 5-15 million VND/month), and poor (15%, less than 5 million VND/month).

*Measure*

We employed a set of questionnaires by Nguyen (2014) on the expressions, causes, and preventive measures of school bullying [15].

We also referred to the questionnaire designed by Chen and Astor (2011) on causes of school bullying, in which there are nine items [14]: attitudes towards violence, ability to control impulsiveness, temperament, parental supervision, inability to comply with school regulations, impressions of school, problematic friendships, victims of violence, and witness of violence; and using a 5-scale Likert scale: 1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Occasionally; 4 = Regularly; 5 = Always. These scales have been confirmed to have high validity and reliability in many research in Viet Nam.

In addition, our questionnaire includes questions related to participants' general information: gender, grade, academic performance, living with whom (parent and sibling, or not living with a parent), self-evaluation of family financial status (Upper-income family, Middle-income family, Lower middle-income family, and Poor family), and self-assessment of levels of being bullied during the academic year.

All data were analyzed using SPSS 20.0 in percentage, mean, standard deviation, Cronbach's Alpha, T-Test, One-way ANOVA, etc.

*Variable*

Dependent variables are scales used to measure the causes of violence and being bullied.

Independent variables are personal factors (age, gender, number of violent times in a year, living with whom, self-evaluation of family financial status), forms of violence (mental, physical, material), measures to reduce bullying, etc.

*Analysis*

There is four content to study in this research. The first (content 1) is Evaluation of levels of being bullied within the last year (mental, physical, and material bullying) (10 items); Causes of being bullied (content 2, 18 items); Causes of school violence (content 3, 9 items); and the last (content 4) is Measures to prevent school violence (16 items).

Content 1, 2, and 3 using 5-point Likert scale: 0 = Never true; 1 = Almost true; 2 = Occasionally true; 3 = Usually true; 4 = Always true. After that, the levels will be measure as below:

- 1.00 - 1.80 = Very low
- 1.81 - 2.60 = Low
- 2.61 - 3.40 = Medium
- 3.41 - 4.20 = High
- 4.21 - 5.00 = Very high

Content 4 using 3-point Likert scale: 0 = Not necessary; 1 = Necessary; 2 = Very necessary. Then the content will be measure as below:

- .00 - .33 = Low
- .34 - .66 = Medium
- .67 - 1.00 = High

Data cleaning, entrance, and analysis were done with SPSS 20.0. Results of frequency and percentage were employed to describe causes of violence and independent variables. Chi-square test ($\chi2$) and logistics regression with Backward LR were done with significance $\alpha = .05$ to identify corresponding factors related to the causes of violence.

*Research ethics*

This study was compiled with the university regulations on research ethics and conducted after being approved by the Board of Research Ethics, Faculty of Psychology and Education, University of Science and Education, The University of Danang, Da Nang, Vietnam, and upon participants' consent.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

*Current situation of students experiencing school bullying*

The results show that within an academic year (April 2020 - April 2021), the number of students experiencing no violence was 26.1%, from 1-2 times was 19.1%; from 2-4 times was 19.1%; from 5-9 times was 27.5%; over 10 times was 6.4%, as show in **Table 1**.

**Table 1.** Times of being bullied

|  | **n** | **%** |
|---|---|---|
| None | 255 | 26.1 |
| 1-2 times | 187 | 19.1 |
| 2-5 times | 204 | 20.9 |
| 6-9 times | 269 | 27.5 |
| Over 10 times | 63 | 6.4 |

n: Number of participants; %: Percentage.

Regarding genders, among the participants as show in **Table 2**, there were 63.5% female students experiencing violence which was twice as many as their male counterparts. 7th graders were bullied the most with 26%, followed by 6th graders (accounted for 25.6%). Regarding family members, students living with parents and siblings suffered from violence the most, with 51.3%. Regarding academic performance, there were 49.2% of students with fair academic results experienced bullying. Regarding family financial status, students in lower-middle-income families (200$-600$/month) were bullied the most with 54.9%, while those in upper-income families (>1.300$) experienced the least with only 4.3%.

**Table 2.** Students' experienced school violence over the last year

|  | once to twice times | | 2 - 5 times | | 6 - 10 times | | > 10 times | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| **Gender** | | | | | | | | | | |
| Male | 70 | 26.5 | 76 | 28.8 | 94 | 35.6 | 24 | 9.1 | 264 | 36.5 |
| Female | 117 | 25.5 | 128 | 27.9 | 175 | 38.1 | 39 | 8.5 | 459 | 63.5 |
| **Grade** | | | | | | | | | | |
| Grade 6 | 52 | 28.1 | 43 | 23.2 | 78 | 42.2 | 12 | 6.5 | 185 | 25.6 |
| Grade 7 | 50 | 26.6 | 58 | 30.9 | 62 | 33.0 | 18 | 9.6 | 188 | 26.0 |
| Grade 8 | 45 | 25.1 | 58 | 32.4 | 58 | 32.4 | 18 | 10.1 | 179 | 24.8 |
| Grade 9 | 40 | 23.4 | 45 | 26.3 | 71 | 41.5 | 15 | 8.8 | 171 | 23.7 |
| **Academic performance** | | | | | | | | | | |
| Poor | - | - | 2 | 100 | - | - | - | - | 2 | .3 |
| Average | 67 | 26.8 | 77 | 30.8 | 88 | 35.2 | 18 | 7.2 | 250 | 34.6 |
| Fair | 90 | 25.3 | 96 | 27.0 | 138 | 38.8 | 32 | 9.0 | 356 | 49.2 |
| Good | 30 | 28.0 | 26 | 24.3 | 39 | 36.4 | 12 | 11.2 | 107 | 14.8 |
| Excellent | - | - | 3 | 37.5 | 4 | 50.0 | 1 | 12.5 | 8 | 1.1 |
| **Current familial status** | | | | | | | | | | |
| Not living with parent | 24 | 24.0 | 34 | 34.0 | 32 | 32.0 | 10 | 10.0 | 100 | 13.8 |
| Living with parent | 74 | 29.4 | 68 | 27.0 | 93 | 36.9 | 17 | 6.7 | 252 | 34.9 |
| Living with parent and sibling | 89 | 24.0 | 102 | 27.5 | 144 | 38.8 | 36 | 9.7 | 371 | 51.3 |
| **Family financial status (income per month)** | | | | | | | | | | |
| Poor ( ≤ 200$ / month) | 33 | 28.9 | 32 | 28.1 | 45 | 39.5 | 4 | 3.5 | 114 | 15.8 |

| Lower middle-income (200 - 1000$ / month) | 111 | 28.0 | 107 | 27.0 | 142 | 35.8 | 37 | 9.3 | 397 | 54.9 |
| Middle-income (1000 - 1200$ / month) | 35 | 19.3 | 58 | 32.0 | 70 | 38.7 | 18 | 9.9 | 181 | 25.0 |
| Upper-income (≥ 1200$ / month) | 8 | 25.8 | 7 | 22.6 | 12 | 38.7 | 4 | 12.9 | 31 | 4.3 |

n: Number of participants; %: Percentage.

The results show in **Table 3**, 12 types of violence **(Table 3)** with Cronbach's Alpha = 8.51. The total rate of students suffering from violence is 73.9%, of which 76.61% are mental bullying; physical violence is 73.08% and material abuse 72.22%, respectively. In terms of mental bullying, students suffered most from social exclusion, notably "I was intentionally excluded from class activities, neglected and isolated from groups of friends" (accounted for 77.3%); Followed by "I was misjudged, blamed, disliked, and isolated by friends and/or classmates" (accounted for 76.89%); Followed by "I was called names, teased, and ridiculed publicly" (accounted for 76.28%). The rate of students experiencing physical violence (kicking, punching, or being attacked by friends using shoes, sticks, books, etc.) is the least with (70.4%) among the 12 types. Nevertheless, this rate is still high compared with previous research by [4, 5].

**Table 3.** Types of bullying

|  | n | % | R |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Mental bullying** | | | |
| I was called names, teased, ridiculed publicly. | 555 | 76.79 | 3 |
| I was misjudged, blamed, disliked, and isolated purposely. | 558 | 77.20 | 2 |
| I was excluded from class activities, neglected and isolated from groups of friends. | 570 | 78.83 | 1 |
| I received messages with hurtful/cruel words via telephone text messages, Zalo, Facebook messages, etc. | 549 | 75.97 | 4 |
| I was fabricated, slandered, made up with bad rumors, and threatened to publicize my personal information. | 529 | 73.21 | 7 |
| *Average points of Mental violence group* | | **76.40** | |
| **Physical bullying** | | | |
| I was threatened, forced to do things against my will (do homework, cheating on friends or driving classmates to school, etc.) | 540 | 74.64 | 5 |
| I was kicked, punched, or attacked by friends with shoes, sticks, books, etc. | 515 | 71.17 | 12 |
| My friends pulled my hair, pushed, poured water, or threw things at me. | 529 | 73.11 | 8 |
| I was "locked" in the classroom or toilet by my friends. | 531 | 73.42 | 6 |
| *Average points of Physical violence group* | | **73.08** | |
| **Material abuse** | | | |
| I was intentionally "begged" for money, or my school supplies, personal belongings, and money were taken away by my friends. | 526 | 72.70 | 9 |
| My books, school supplies, personal belongings were damaged by my friends intentionally. | 516 | 71.37 | 11 |
| I was forced to give friends money, food, school supplies, or personal belongings. | 525 | 72.60 | 10 |
| *Average points of Material abuse group* | | **72.22** | |
| *Average of violence groups* | | **73.90** | |

n: Number of participants; %: Percentage; R: Ranking.

One-way ANOVA and T-Test correlation analysis among causes of violence showed no correlation between causes of violence and genders; grades; schools; living with parents or not; family financial status (with sig. > .05). This is understandable as many students can be at risk of school bullying.

*Causes of bullying*

We are using the test of Chen and Astor (2011), with nine factors as show in **Table 4**, the Cronbach's Alpha result is 8.08 [14]. Average scores of all nine factors are M = 2.51, we find the first cause of violent behaviour of students is "Inability in controlling impulsive acts" (with M = 2.83); followed by "hot-temper" (M = 2.67); followed by "close relationship with parents" (M = 2.66); and lastly "used to be a victim of school bullying" (M = 2.60). However, after analyzing the regression coefficients of predictor variables affecting causes of school bullying, we find that predictor variables are students' ability to control impulsiveness, students' hot-temper; students' previous experience of violence (Sig. < .001); and closeness with parents (Sig. = .25)

**Table 4.** Regression coefficients of predictor variables affecting causes of school bullying.

| | M | R | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | t | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | B | Std. Error | Beta | | |
| (Constant) | | | .935 | .046 | | 20.481 | .000 |
| Perception of violence | 2.32 | 7 | .020 | .020 | .033 | .973 | .331 |
| Ability to control impulsiveness | 2.83 | 1 | .236 | .020 | .410 | 11.676 | .000 |
| Hot temper | 2.67 | 2 | .206 | .021 | .342 | 9.988 | .000 |
| Child-parent closeness | 2.66 | 3 | .079 | .036 | .127 | 2.237 | .025 |
| Poor compliance with school regulations | 2.37 | 6 | .022 | .047 | .037 | .467 | .641 |
| Impression of the school | 2.26 | 9 | -.033 | .022 | -.054 | -1.492 | .136 |
| Problematic friendships | 2.60 | 5 | .016 | .022 | .025 | .705 | .481 |
| Victim of violence | 2.61 | 4 | -.013 | .048 | -.022 | -.276 | .783 |
| Witness of violence | 2.29 | 8 | .152 | .036 | .246 | 4.230 | .000 |

M: Mean; R: Ranking.

Research results show that the rate of school violence among secondary school students in Da Nang city in the past year was 73.9%, of which the rate of students experiencing violence over 10 times a year is 6.4%, from 6-9 times/year is 27.5% (that is, during a school year of 9 months, on average, these students were bullied one time per month). This result is within the range of violence rates in Asia and the world [4]. However, this result is higher than that of previous studies by Le-Thi (2017) (with 67.4%); Le-Thi (2016) (with 56%) [5, 18].

The results also show that students experiencing violence the most are those living with their parents (accounted for 51.3%) **(Table 2)**. In addition, regarding the factor "witnessing violence" as a predictor variable to the causes of school violence **(Table 4)**, it is necessary further to study the correlation between domestic violence and school bullying and witnessing family/school violence and violence others.

In addition, the results show that students mainly suffered from mental bullying, which accounted for 76.4% **(Table 3)**, related to bad-mouthing, isolating, class activity exclusion, desertion, neglect, etc. Upon our in-depth interview, T.L.O, a 7th grader, said: "*Almost all of us go through those days. The 6th graders, as newcomers to school, will be forced to obey their seniors; if they resist, they will be isolated immediately. The 7th and 8th graders who are more familiar with the school and have more friends also find it difficult to befriend because of different interests and hobbies. In their 9th grade, differences in choosing a more or less prestigious high school, or having a boyfriend or girlfriend are typical topics of conflicts and causes of violence eventually*".

The research findings also show that the factors that cause violent acts are: inability to control impulsiveness; hot-temper; the witness of violence, or problematic child-parent relationships. This result is similar to a few studies in Viet Nam [15] and the world [14]. This can be orientations for further research on three topics to reduce violent behaviors in students as follows: (1) helping students to control impulsive acts and hot-temper; (2) measures to prevent children from witnessing violence; (3) helping children have a close connection with their family.

The current school violence situation among secondary school students in Da Nang shows that 73.9% of students experience violence. Female students suffering from violence outnumber their male peers (with 63.5%). Students living with their parents experience violence more than other groups (with 51.3%). In terms of grades, 7th graders suffer the most violence (with 26%). In terms of family financial status, students in lower-income families (income of 200-1000 USD/month) experience violence the most (with 54.9%). In terms of academic performance, students of fair academic results experienced violence the most (with 49.2%). In terms of forms of bullying, students suffered most from mental violence (with 76.4%).

Among the predictor factors for school bullying, the most likely cause is "inability to control impulsiveness" (M = 2.83); "hot-temper" (M = 2.67); and "no closeness with parents" (M = 2.66). We believe that schools and families need to pay more attention to students' safety from the above results. What is more, it is necessary to develop measures to help students control impulsiveness; reduce hot-temper, and enhance child-parent closeness. This is also consistent with results from previous studies by Jiménez-Barbero *et al.* (2016); Mateo *et al.* (2009); Nguyen (2014); Prime Minister (2017) [15, 24-26].

## CONCLUSION

Most students suffered from mental violence. Gender, grades, schools, and violence or being bullied had no significant differences. Inability to regulate impulsiveness, strong temper, and witnesses to violence were key factors of bullying. Concerns about victims or witnesses of violence should be addressed jointly by schools and families. School therapy, problem-solving skills, and self-defense coaching should be organized to help children deal with school bullying. We also advocate establishing a school counseling office with a counselor or psychologist on staff to provide psychological support to students. Secondary schools must organize life skills, problem-solving skills, real-world scenario skills, communication skills, etc. coaching courses. Educating students should be coordinated with parents to reduce student exposure to violent situations. More research is needed on the links between academic pressure, family ties, and violent occurrences. Families should also support their children emotionally and talk about life issues to recognize and prevent school bullying.

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