

# AN INVESTIGATION ON VERBAL BULLYING AMONG DANANG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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**Abstract** - Bullying among students in general and high school students in particular has become a pressing issue in the world and in Vietnam today. The paper focuses on investigating verbal bullying between high school students in Da Nang city, and developing measures to reduce bullying in high school students. Methods used in the research include theoretical analysis and synthesis, questionnaire, in-depth interviews, and educational experiment. Verbal bullying is explored in terms of the level and content of bullying, the awareness of consequences of bullying on students. Mitigating measures of verbal bullying are designed to use peer-to-peer influences through behavioral club activity, social networking forums, and acting in bullying situations brochure-building activities. The interventions are designed to focus on enhancing the ability to control emotions and form appropriate behaviors, thereby reducing verbal bullying. Experimental measures are implemented through real-life activities undertaken by high school students. Research findings reveal that all the measures suggested in the research appeared effective. Peer education is an effective option to influence verbal bullying behavior in high school students.

**Key words** - Bullying; Verbal bullying; Da Nang; Students; High School

## 1. Introduction

Bullying in school in general, and verbal bullying (VB) in high school students in particular, is a problem that has received widespread attention from international and Vietnamese academic communities.

Overseas research on bullying and abuse is reflected in the works of Boulton & Under-wood, 1992; Glover, Gough, Johnson, & Cartwright, 2000; Siann, Callaghan, Glissav, Lockhart, & Rawson, 1994; Smith & Brain, 2000; Smith, 1999; Timmerman, 2003; Berthold & Hoover, 2000; Bosworth, Espelage & Simon, 1999; Charach, Pepler, & Ziegler, 1995; Fineran & Bennett, 1999; Nansel et al, 2001; Pellegrini, 2001; Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Smith, Morita, et al., 1999; Adair, Dixon, Moore, & Sutherland, 2000; Owens, Shute & Slee, 2000; Smith & Brain, 2000; Smith, Morita et al., 1999 [1]. Researchers have found that this phenomenon is common among school-aged children in many countries in Europe; even though school-aged students are also bullied and violently abused by teachers and staff, bullying of the same age is more common [2, 3]; many young people are directly involved in bullying as perpetrators, victims, or both [4].

In Vietnam, there have been studies on bullying recently. These include the researches of Pham Hoang Ha and Hoang Gia Trang, 2002; Le Ngoc Dung, Ho Ba Thong, 2004; Nguyen Phuong Thao et al, 2005; Nguyen

Thi Phuong, 2006; Hoang Xuan Dung, 2010; Tran Thi Minh Duc, Hoang Xuan Dung, 2010; Pham Van Tu et al, 2012; Pham Thi Thanh Thuy, 2014 [5]. These studies have focused on clarifying theoretical issues about aggression, violence and bullying, creating a theoretical basis for practical studies on school bullying. At the same time, studies also show the urgency of the problem of school bullying in Vietnam, and suggest measures to reduce this situation [5, 6].

In short, domestic and foreign studies show that the problem of VB is common in high school students, causing serious harms and needing mitigation measures. In this article, the research team will focus on studying the behavior of VB in high school students in Danang City, and basing on the findings, to suggest intervention measures to reduce this behavior in high school students.

## 2. Research questions and scientific hypotheses

In this study, verbal bullying is defined as behavior when an individual uses words (eg, insults, teasers, etc.) to gain power over others. Behavior of VB may be related to anything about body weight, appearance, race, sex. The VB behavior is repeated, or tends to be repeated.

The research questions are identified as: 1) Is the behavior of VB popular among high school students? 2) Do high school students have correct identification of VB behavior? Are they aware of the harmful effects of VB? Do they know how to behave appropriately with VB? 3) What is the attitude of high school students toward VB? 4) Is there a gender difference in VB behavior? 5) What is the cause of VB among high school students? 6) How to reduce VB behavior among high school students?

Based on these 06 research questions, the hypotheses are set:

Hypothesis 1: Behavior of VB is popular among high school students.

Hypothesis 2: High school students correctly identify the VB behavior, the harmful effects of VB, but do not know how to behave in accordance with the VB.

Hypothesis 3: High school students have an attitude that is not consistent with VB.

Hypothesis 4: Both male and female students participate in VB. However, there are gender differences in behavior of VB, in which more female students participate in VB than male students.

Hypothesis 5: The main cause of VB among high school students is because they do not know how to behave appropriately with VB, cannot control their emotions.

Hypothesis 6: It is possible to mitigate VB behaviors in high school students through peer education in the appropriate form for students.

### 3. Design and research methods

#### Research design

The main identifiers of VB behavior are: 1) Use aggressive or offensive words; 2) Offensive to the target; 3) Repeat or tend to repeat; and 4) Express the desire of the speaker to gain power (harm or disturb) to the person being targeted.

Behavior of VB is studied in the following aspects: 1) The extent and common form of VB behavior; and 2) Awareness, attitude and behavior of high school students with VB.

The cause of VB behavior is studied in the direction of showing the main causes of bullying behavior.

Measures to mitigate VB behaviors in high school students are developed and tested in the direction of peer intervention, including: 1) Organize club for behavior skills with bullying for high school students; 2) Design and use fanpage on Facebook to share and consult behaviors for VB; and 3) Build an image-based handbook to guide the treatment of VB.

#### Research methods

*The theoretical research methods* used in the study include analysis and synthesis. Analysis and synthesis used to study available in the world and in Vietnam theoretical documents, research works related to the topic. Specifically, the above methods are used to: defining tool concepts (bullying and VB behavior); synthesizing the research results on VB in high school students; summarising, grouping causes of VB in high school students; summarising ways to effectively influence bullying behavior in high school students; arguing for proposed impact measures.

*The practical research methods* used include questionnaire, in-depth interviews, personality diagnostic test designed by V. S. Mukhina [7] and pedagogical experiment.

- Questionnaires, in-depth interviews were used to study the characteristics of VB behavior of high school students. VB is surveyed in terms of: 1) The extent and form of dissemination; 2) High school students' awareness, attitudes and behaviors with bullying; 3) Bullying consequences caused to students; 4) Agents affecting bullying. Questionnaire and in-depth interviews were also used in assessing the effectiveness of the impact measures that this study carried out. Survey forms and in-depth interview minutes are designed for this purpose.

- Personality diagnosis test is used to survey how high school students react to bullying. Tests are done in an individual form.

- Experiment used to check the impact of bullying mitigation measures. Experiment was done with a single group. Testee were invited to participate in behavior club activities, discuss via forums on social networks about situations of dealing with bullying (fanpage SYS on Facebook), and work together to build and study handbooks with instructions for bullying situations. Questionnaire and in-depth interviews were used in assessing the effectiveness of the impact measures proposed by the research team.

*Data processing* is done by the method of mathematical statistics through Microsoft Excel 2010 software.

#### Sample of research

Samples for questionnaires were randomly selected by the sampling according to quotas. The randomly selected high schools are high schools: Phan Chau Trinh, Nguyen Trai and Le Quy Don in Da Nang city. The survey sample size is calculated according to the educational sample size sheet with a confidence level  $\gamma$  of 85% and an error  $\epsilon$  of 0.05 consisting of 207 elements. The authors surveyed 227 high school students, obtained 209 valid votes. For the in-depth interview, the sample selection includes 21 students from the three high schools mentioned above. Personality diagnosis test was performed on 30 students.

Experiment samples were randomly selected in students of 03 high schools: Phan Chau Trinh, Nguyen Trai, Le Quy Don in Da Nang city. Students were selected to participate in the intervention activities within the project, including the following activities: 1) Organize activities for skills of behavioral treatment with 20 high school students; 2) Design and use fanpage on Facebook to share and consult behaviors for VB behavior with 48 students participating in closed group; and 3) Build an image-based handbook to guide the treatment of VB with 42 students.

#### Design and organization of intervention

Measures are designed on the basis of peer intervention and real experience, that aimed at students' weaknesses – the lack of ability to control emotions and lack of appropriate behavior with VB.

The scientific basis of mitigation measures is the findings of usefulness of interventions discovered by Wendy [8], Farrington and Ttofi [9], Kärnä and colleagues [10]. These studies show the empathy and autonomy of peers in supporting victims. Official participation of peers is effective in reducing bullying in adolescents. Psychological characteristics of high school age with reorientation from parents, adult to friends; the increasing need for communication with peers [11] is an opportunity for developing mitigation impacts based on actual group activities, closed groups on Facebook and other collective activities.

The practical basis of the interventions by peer impact is the findings on behavior of VB of this survey.

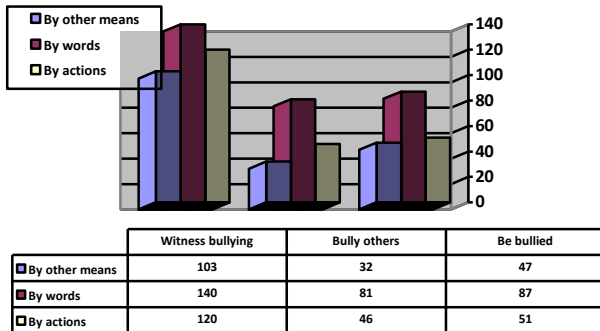
The research was conducted in the period of August 2018 to December 2019.

#### 4. Research results

##### *The prevalence of VB behaviors in high school students*

The prevalence of VB behaviors in high school students is shown in Figure 1.

The questionnaire data of bullying sentences that students once said or heard also showed the popularity of VB. Data shown in Table 1 illustrate that over 50% of students have heard and said typical bullying sentences of high school students.



**Figure 1.** The prevalence of bullying in high school students

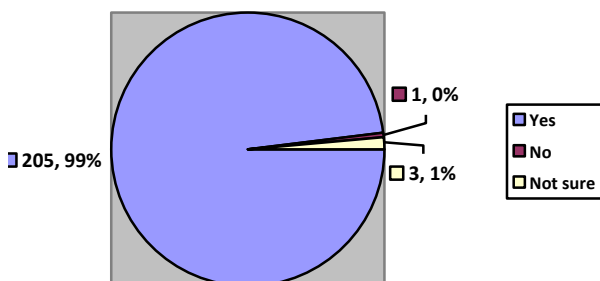
**Table 1.** Common bullying sentences said or heard by students

Sentences that you have said or heard		Number (n = 209)	Percentage %
A	"Looking you like this, your parents won't be good either"	107/209	51.2
B	"Looking you like this, you won't be good either"	99/209	47.4
C	"It's bad to like to post pictures. Adjust all"	140/209	66.9
D	"As bad as you are, but also someone likes it?"	145/209	69.4
E	"Social subjects are so easy to learn, only ignorant ones follow the social block"	104/209	49.8
F	"Study as you learn!"	146/209	69.9
G	"Even you can get a higher score than me!"	118/209	56.5

**Conclusion:** VB is a common phenomenon in high school students. Hypothesis 1 is proven true.

##### *Perception and behavior of students about VB behavior*

Survey results show that students correctly identify the VB behavior. The level of awareness of high school students on the harmful effects of VB is illustrated in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Students' awareness of the harmful effects of VB

Survey data shows that the majority (98.5%) of high school students are aware of both the concept of VB and negative impacts of VB behavior; Almost no students are wrongly aware or unaware of the harmful effects of this type of behavior.

Survey data also gives information that a majority of high school students in high school (over 50%) do not know how to deal with VB behaviors both in the cases of being bullied (61.5%) and witnessing bullying (54.55%).

The results of the personality diagnosis and interview showed that among the 21 students interviewed, 7 students would ignore and go away when witnessed bullying.

The quite typical answer for the behavior of students is: *"I am very angry and annoyed with this situation, but I think some people and even myself often will not interfere with that and choose to stand out or leave because I'm afraid of being involved or affected."* (student D.T.T.N.)

**Conclusion:** Hypothesis 2 is confirmed correctly. High school students identify correctly VB behaviors, they are aware of the harmful effects of VB, but do not know how to behave correctly with VB.

##### *Attitude of students toward VB behavior*

The survey results of students' attitudes towards VB, as the bully, the bullied and the bystander are shown in Table 2. The results showed that the majority of students had false reactions when placing themselves in the position of the bully (77.75%), the bullied (55.67%) and the bystander (53.32%).

**Conclusion:** hypothesis 3 is confirmed. High school students have an attitude that is not consistent with the VB.

**Table 2.** Attitude of students toward bullying

Reaction when A tells B "You are a waste":					
Reaction when being A	Number selected	Reaction when being B	Number selected	Reaction as a witness	Number selected
Gloating	93	Angry	110	Angry	76
Excited	64	Uncomfortable	121	Uneasy, annoyed	145
Comfortable	41	Loss of confidence	91	Feel poor for B	102
Confident	22	Disappointed about himself/herself	79	Sad	26
Normal	49	Normal	21	Normal	21
Repentant	42	Shy	60	Excited	4
Regret	35	Hurt	39	Satisfied, gloating	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>346</b>		<b>521</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>377</b>

##### *Gender disparity in VB behavior of high school students*

Survey results on the participation of students of both sexes in VB are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** The participation of male and female students in the VB

Participation as	Witness (a)		Bully (b)		Bullied (c)	
Sex	M	F	M	F	M	F
Number of students	45	95	24	57	26	61
Total	140		81		87	

**Conclusion:** The survey results show that participation in VB is common in both male and female students. There are gender differences in behavior of VB ( $\chi^2$  test, with  $p=0.001$  case (a)  $\chi^2 = 17.86 > \text{sig.}=10.83$ ; (b)  $\chi^2 = 13.44 > \text{sig.}=10.83$  and (c)  $\chi^2 = 14.08 > \text{sig.}=10.83$ ). Female students participate more in VB than male students (mostly bullying). Hypothesis 4 is proven right.

### Causes of VB in high school students

The survey results of students' perceptions of causes of VB are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Students' perceptions of the causes of bullying by words

The cause of VB	Number selected	Percentage (%)
a. Parents often quarrel at home or they're divorced	92	6.63
b. Father/ mother died or did not live with parents	55	3.97
c. Parents let children be too free	90	6.49
d. Have been bullied	124	8.94
e. Do imitate friends, adults	150	10.81
f. Due to lack of vocabulary or ways of expression emotions/thoughts	57	4.11
g. Due to lack of management and strict regulations from the school	99	7.14
h. Due to lack of responsibility with words	138	9.95
i. Because the "ego" is too high; like to be dreadful, to show "ego"	162	11.68
k. Lack of ability to control emotions and behavior	141	10.17
l. Mindless, think just a joke	142	10.24
m. Do not know that one can hurt others by words	137	9.88
<b>Total</b>	<b>1387</b>	<b>100</b>

Survey results by interviews and personality diagnostic tests showed that among 21 students participating in the survey, 18 students thought bullying was due to a bad relationship. Student L.N.T.H. said: "I think it comes from the fact that the two of you have a conflict so when you argue, you drag this person's point to curse." Student N.T.V.P.: "I think this guy is jealous or has an interest in girls before, so he deliberately said the words to retaliate and hurt this girl."

Three of the 21 students who participated in the survey thought that the "too big Ego" led to a bad relationship and led to bullying.

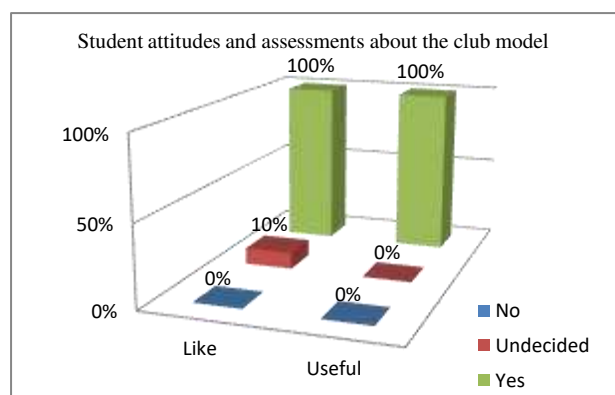
**Conclusion:** The main cause of VB among high school students is that they do not know how to behave in

accordance with VB, cannot control their emotions. Research hypothesis 5 is proven right.

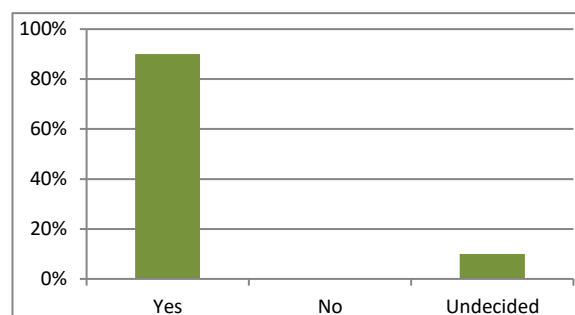
### The effectiveness of the proposed measures

**Activity 1:** Join the club, extracurricular activities on the topic of dealing with VB behavior.

The results of students' assessment on club model are illustrated in Figure 3.

**Figure 3.** Students' attitudes and assessments about the behavioral club

To test students' assessment, the research team used the question: "Do you want to continue to participate in the club activities?". Survey results are shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 4.** Commitment to participate in club activities

**Conclusion:** Organizing clubs and extracurricular activities on the topic of VB is a relatively new model for high school students. It has a positive impact on the thinking of young people, helps to raise awareness, attitude as well as develop appropriate behavior for adolescent in VB situations. This kind of activity should be maintained, expanded and developed.

**Activity 2.** Create and use handbook to prevent bullying.

The effectiveness of creating and using handbook to prevent bullying was surveyed through interviews and questionnaire on popularity (students read and use them) and the impact of the handbook.

Survey results show that 29/30 (96.7%) students interested in reading the handbook of bullying prevention; and the rest (3.3%) was not interested in.

The findings on the impact of the handbook shown on Figure 5.

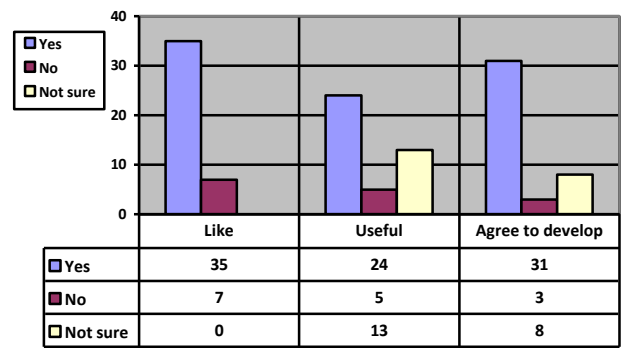


Figure 5. Students' assessment of the handbook

The results of the in-depth interviews also show the students' positive attitude toward the handbook. Student N.T.N.T.: *"The first thing is that this handbook is very unique. Before reading it, I have never seen a book with such high interaction with readers, and the topic is new and attractive to myself. I found myself somewhere in the pictures"*.

Students are ready to use and have used handbooks in practice. Student H.T.N.: *"In the past, I used to take part in a talk about bullying. There, we did a lot of activities like watching videos, roleplaying. And also, I have used your VB handbook"*.

Activities of creating and using of bullying prevention handbooks bring significant changes in student behavior toward VB. The results of in-depth interviews allow to confirm these changes. 100% of students (21/21) participated in the creation and using of bullying prevention handbook, at different levels, affirming that this activity changed the way students behave with VB, helping to not only be more confident, but also have new choices to behave. Here are some explanatory comments

Student N.T.N.T.: *"Actually I used to be a bully and was bullied at the same time. When I was in my first year of elementary school, I had been bullied. I really wanted to argue, I wanted to fight back, I wanted the bully to understand my feelings. But as I grew older, I realized that fighting was not the best solution and I just argued back with words. And after watching the handbook, I have now learned more effective ways. Now, when being bullied, I still reply in a humorous and happy way, still keeping the air, the peaceful atmosphere between the two sides while protecting my dignity"*.

**Conclusion:** The handbook on VB prevention is a completely new model, getting the students' love, having a positive impact, improving the ability of young people to control emotions and handle situations when being bullied. The handbook can grow and be improved.

**Activity 3:** Establish fanpage "SYS - Share Your Story" and closed group on Facebook.

Survey results of fanpage SYS: there were 103 likes within 2 weeks; Closed group: there were 48 participants with 9 shared articles and 45 positive comments within 02 weeks. The number of people seeing closed group useful is shown in Figure 6. The

number of people who want to maintain a closed group is shown in Figure 7.

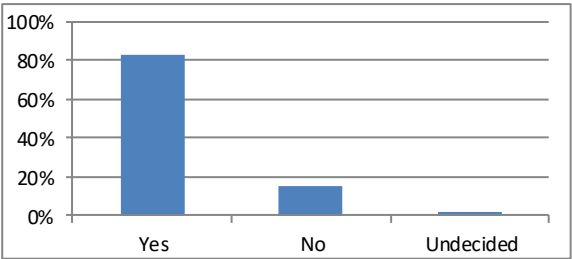


Figure 6. Number of people who see closed group useful

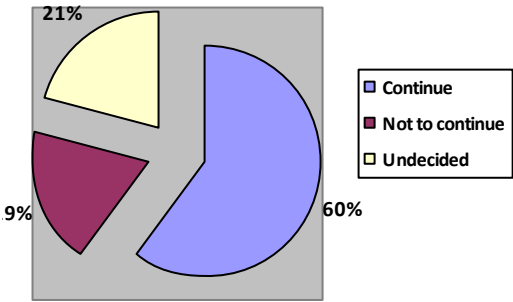


Figure 7. The number of people looking forward to maintaining the closed group

**Conclusion:** Although fanpage is not a new model, and it's very difficult for students to share their stories with others, organizing fanpage SYS and closed group on Facebook to discuss topics of VB has a positive impact. Participated students were ready to share their "inherently hidden" stories with other. This form of activity appeared effective, supporting students with friendly spaces for sharing their own experiences and thoughts about VB behavior. Through this activity, students recognize that the problems of VB are not only their own worries. They have opportunity to relieve stresses and worries caused by VB behavior, learn ways to control emotions and ways to behave appropriately through the experience of peer friends.

5. Conclusion

The study allows to come to the following conclusions:

VB is a common phenomenon in high school students. High school students identify correctly VB behaviors. They are aware of the harmful effects of VB, but do not know how to behave in VB situations. High school students have an attitude that is not consistent with the VB. Both male and female students participate in VB. However, there are gender differences in behavior of VB, in which female students are more involved in bullying than male students. The main cause of VB among high school students is that they do not know how to behave in VB situations as well as cannot control their emotions.

The forms of peer intervention proposed by the research team, which built and tested towards the development of emotional control and proper behavior with VB, including: 1) Organizing clubs, extracurricular

activities on the topic of VB among high school students; 2) Creating and using Fanpage on Facebook to share and consult the way to deal with VB; 3) Designing a handbook to guide the valuable treatment of VB. These forms of intervention help to reduce VB behaviors in high school students (100% testee confirmed). Thus, peer education with the forms proposed by the research team is an effective choice to influence bullying behavior in high school students, reducing this behavior in high school students in Da Nang City.

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