

Characteristics and Reasons of Middle School Teachers' Verbal Abuse to Students in China

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China, as a vast country with millions of children of school age, is evolving itself into an education superpower in recent decades. The negative impact of teachers' verbal abuse on students' development arising along in this evolution shall never be neglected. This study investigated 364 pupils from four provinces and cities in China, using mixed research method to analyze questionnaire and interview data. The study found that although verbal abuse, which was manifested in personal relationship, by middle school teachers was not common, it still caused great psychological damage to the pupils. Students' poor academic performance was the primary reason for teachers' verbal abuse. The occurrence of verbal abuses significantly related to students' gender and academic performance. Male students and students with poor academic performance were more vulnerable to verbal abuse from teachers. In addition, the study found that students who frequently suffered from teachers' verbal abuse were more likely to be the victim of school bullying. This study suggests that the government and schools take joint measures to clarify the specific boundary of teachers' verbal punishment in school and to standardize their verbal behavior, so that they can truly respect and care for students and create a beneficial learning environment in school.

Keywords: middle school teachers, secondary education, verbal abuse, characteristics

Introduction

Verbal abuse is widely studied internationally whereas no operational definition has been universally acknowledged at the moment. Infante (1995, pp. 51-63) uses the term "verbal aggression", and defines it as "message behavior, which attacks a person's self-concept in order to deliver psychological pain", including "name-calling, teasing, ridicule, taunts, insults and threats". Grady (2003, p. 224) believes that verbal abuse can be defined as "words that attack or injure an individual, words that cause one to believe an untrue statement, or words that speak falsely of an individual". Eliasson (2007, p. 11) takes verbal abuse as "a speech act with derogatory consequences for the respondent or for the group she/he is ascribed to, regardless of intent to hurt", because sometimes the verbal abuse is practiced via indirect wordings or paralinguistic cues, like tone of voice, body language, or gestures accompanying the utterance.

Acknowledgements: This paper is funded by the 2023 Education Science Planning Project of Zhejiang Province "Research on the Practice Path of High Quality and Balanced Development of Compulsory Education in Zhejiang Province" (2023GF078); 2024 Boda Scientific Research Enhancement Special Plan Project (2024QNZD6).

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However, the definition should not be solely focused on language per se, but also relate to the context when using the language. Nandlal and Wood (1997) reveal that there are two kinds of verbal abuse: using abusive language and using language abusively. The former refers to language that has abusive referential meaning like swearing, and it examines language removed from its natural context (Schiffrin, 1994). In contrast, the latter means that the teacher performs a social action that is viewed negatively such as insulting; it also means that the abusers do not express their anger overtly, but abuse much more covertly (Evans, 2010). The majority of the interviewees in Brenda's 2015 research emphasized that the intensity of the pain and humiliation the students were experiencing was not only related to the content of the offending comments by teachers but also to the circumstances under which such comments were made. Thus, when studying verbal abuse by teachers in middle school, not only the language that contains negative messages should be recorded, but the given context and situation of the speech act be studied.

Method

Data Collection

In this study, the quantitative research is used to collect the relevant factors about the characteristics of teachers' verbal abuse and to describe the status quo in Chinese middle schools. Each participant was given a modified version of the Teachers Trainees Questionnaire that was shortened and adapted to the Chinese context and it incorporated the basic personal information variable. In order to ensure the rationality of the sample divisions, eight middle schools from four different provinces were selected as the main sample sources for this study. All survey questionnaires were filled out in class. This study used random sampling in the sample selection, and 20 students were selected from each class according to the vertical seat sequence. The average time for each questionnaire was five minutes. The survey questionnaire was drafted in simplified Chinese, the subject students' native language. The questionnaires were completed by the pupils during class under the guidance of the researchers, without the presence of their teachers. Survey variable information includes direct and indirect verbal abuse on students. From November 2021 to April 2022, 495 questionnaires were sent and 447 completed questionnaires were returned, with a recovery rate of 90.3%. There were 364 valid questionnaires, and the validity rate was 81.4%. There are 199 (54.7%) female respondents and 165 (45.3%) male respondents.

Variable Settings

Regarding "teachers' verbal abuse", four occasions are listed: Two are direct verbal abuse: loud mockery (e.g., "teachers yell that I'm stupid"), scare (e.g., "teachers threaten me if I don't perform well, they'll tell my parents"); the other two indirect occasions are isolation or disruption of peer relationship (e.g., "teachers stop other students from playing with me) and intentional neglect (e.g., "teachers don't listen to my explanation or care about me"). In terms of "reasons for teachers' verbal abuse", four questions are set. The first two are about learning performance, including breaking the class rules and doing bad at learning; the last two are family background and appearance or way of dressing (see from Table 1).

At the same time, this study also lists the occasions of teachers' positive verbal behaviors, including constant verbal encouragement, patient guidance when students encounter problems, enlightenment and comfort in times of sadness, talking with a good attitude, compliments in front of other students, praise to other teachers or parents etc. Studies have shown that students who are ignored or abused by teachers are more vulnerable to school bullying (Berzenski, Madden, & Yates, 2018). Therefore, this study also deals with the issue of school bullying,

and aims to investigate the correlation between teachers' verbal violence and different types of school bullying among students.

Table 1

Types and Reasons of Teachers' Verbal Abuse

Types of teachers' verbal abuse		Reasons of teachers' verbal abuse	
Direct verbal abuse	Roar, ridicule, taunt	Learning performance	Violation of classroom discipline
	Frighten, threaten		Poor academic performance, wrong answers
Indirect verbal abuse	Isolated, exclude	Other reasons	Family background, economic conditions
	Neglect, ignore		Appearance and way of dressing

Results

Occurrence of Teachers' Verbal Abuse

The survey (Table 2) shows that verbal abuse among teachers in China is relatively less frequent, which shows that most teachers in China can abide by professional language integrity, and verbal abuse from teachers is not a common practice; however, a number of students also reported that they suffered teachers' verbal abuse more frequently. Among the students surveyed, about 25% suffered teachers' direct verbal abuse more than once each semester, and about 15% were indirectly verbally abused more than once per semester. In the interview, it was found that almost every interviewee mentioned that they had been subjected to direct or indirect verbal abuse from teachers to varying degrees; some situations even showed teachers' strong intention to abuse students. This urges us to reflect on whether such verbal admonition is reasonable and can realize the initial purpose of education.

Table 2

Occurrence of Teachers' Verbal Abuse

Types of teachers' verbal abuse	Happened once (number/%)	Happened 2 or 3 times (number/%)	Happened more than 3 times (number/%)
Roar, ridicule, taunt	53 (14.6%)	35 (9.6%)	31 (8.5%)
Frighten, threaten	51 (14%)	16 (4.4%)	13 (3.6%)
Isolated, exclude	54 (14.8%)	14 (3.8%)	8 (2.2%)
Neglect, ignore	31 (8.5%)	18 (4.9%)	13 (3.6%)

Reasons for Students Being Verbally Abused and Its Influence

For analyzing what causes teachers' verbal abuse, this study adopts the statistical method by calculating the proportion of each individual item among total. In order to facilitate the statistics, the two reasons are respectively academic performance (e.g., "scold and teasing because of bad score") and classroom performance (e.g., "disruption of the class discipline"). The total score of "Academic performance" is 605, that of "Classroom performance" is 483, that of "Family background" is 438, and that of "Appearance" is 434. According to Figure 1, it can be found that poor academic performance is the biggest reason for teachers to conduct verbal abuse against middle school students, which is mainly reflected in two aspects: poor academic performance and incorrect answers to simple questions. In this study, students in the interview all have described the causes of teachers' verbal abuse at request.

Teachers' verbal abuse to students will damage students' mental health, which might even last for a long time. According to the survey (Figure 2), only 3% of the respondents hold an "indifferent" attitude towards teachers' verbal abuse, 11.9% of the respondents say they will feel "sad for a while" after the verbal abuse, and

84.81% of the respondents say they will feel “very sad”. In this study, we specifically designed some interview questions for students to describe the impact of teachers’ verbal abuse. Through the analysis of the interview data, we found that teachers’ verbal abuse to students will make students doubt themselves in their study, and will weaken their self-confidence, which have a far-reaching impact.

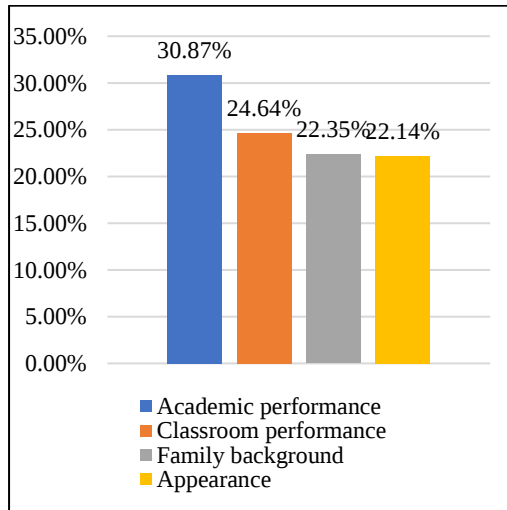


Figure 1. Reasons for students being verbally abused.

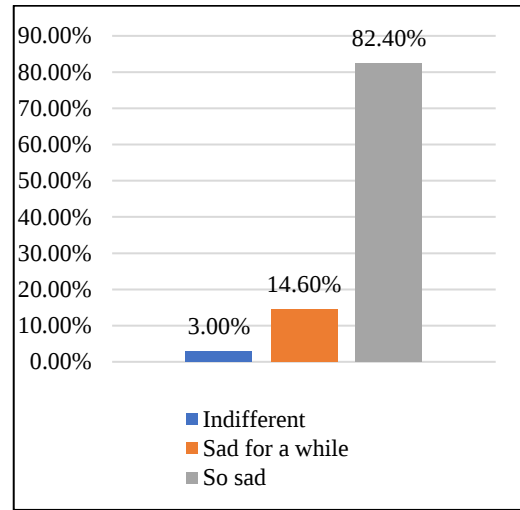


Figure 2. Influence of teachers' verbal abuse.

Characteristics of Teachers' Verbal Abuse

We first use the OLS regression method to observe the influence characteristics of teachers' verbal abuse. As seen from the Table 3, the items “Gender”, “Areas”, “Academic record” passed the significant test ($p < 0.05^*$). We can find that compared to female students, male students are more likely to be abused by teachers ($B = -0.240$, $S.E. = 0.059$). Low grades students are more vulnerable to be verbal abuse by teachers ($B = -0.092$, $S.E. = 0.041$). Students from rural area are also more easily to expose to abuse from teachers than those from cities ($B = 0.132$, $S.E. = 0.041$). Compared with students in public schools, those in private schools are more easily to expose to abuse from teachers ($B = 0.134$, $S.E. = 0.061$). The teachers' verbal abuse has a significant negative impact on academic record ($B = -0.264$, $S.E. = 0.046$). The item of school type did not pass the significance test, which shows that there is no significant difference between public schools and private schools regarding to verbal abuse.

Table 3

Characteristics of Teachers' Verbal Abuse

Items	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.
Gender	-0.240	0.059	-0.201	-4.066	0.000
Grades	-0.092	0.041	-0.110	-2.246	0.025
Areas	0.132	0.060	0.110	2.183	0.030
School type	0.134	0.061	0.112	2.209	0.028
Academic record	-0.264	0.046	-0.276	-5.673	0.000
Constant	2.076	0.200		10.384	0.000

Note. $p < 0.05^*$.

What corresponds to teacher's verbal abuse is teacher's encouragement to students; it does significantly promote positive academic outcomes on students (Tuckman & Sexton, 1991; Alcott, 2017). As can be seen from Table 4, it is another OLS regression method to see the influence characteristics of teachers' verbal

encouragement. Female Students are more likely to be encouraged by teachers than the male students ($B = 0.167$, $S.E. = 0.079$). The teachers' verbal encouragement has a significant positive impact on academic record ($B = 0.526$, $S.E. = 0.084$). As the grade goes up, students are more likely to be encouragement by teachers ($B = 0.224$, $S.E. = 0.055$). The teachers' verbal encouragement also has a significant positive impact on academic record ($B = 0.465$, $S.E. = 0.062$). The item of school type and grades did not pass the significance test, which shows that the both factors do not make difference in verbal abuse. Different from the characteristics of teachers' verbal abuse analysis, the item "Gender" did not pass the significant test.

Table 4

Characteristics of Teachers' Verbal Encouragement

Items	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.
Gender	0.167	0.079	0.102	2.119	0.035
Grades	0.224	0.055	0.197	4.100	0.000
Areas	0.016	0.081	0.010	0.197	0.844
School type	0.136	0.081	0.084	1.680	0.094
Academic record	0.465	0.062	0.358	7.492	0.000
Constant	1.046	0.267		3.921	0.000

Note. $p < 0.05^*$.

Discussion

This study was conducted among Chinese middle school students who are perceived by the author as main contributors to their best interest and in the best position to articulate in a safe environment what was happening in their classroom. Students from different middle schools filled in the questionnaires about teachers' verbal abuse behaviors, and also they were asked to talk about their specific related experience, feelings, and thoughts in their own words.

According to the results above, this study shows that at present, although the verbal abuse of middle school teachers against students in China is not that severe, its existence cannot be denied, and its negative impact on a number of students will undoubtedly cripple their learning enthusiasm and self-efficacy, and damage their interpersonal relationship. The characteristics hereby exhibit in the following aspects. First, direct verbal abuse is the main form of middle school teachers' verbal abuse in China. Second, the major reasons of verbal abuse from middle school teachers are students' unsatisfying academic performance and in-class behavior. Dressing or family background are not significant factors. Third, even when both boy and girl students are struggling with academic learning, boys have a higher possibility of experiencing teachers' verbal abuse. This difference might base on the sexuality stereotype preconceiving boys are usually the deal breakers. As a result, this study calls for teachers' equal treatment of male and female students and against gender stereotypes.

The reasons behind are worthy of consideration given China's distinguished domestic educational features. One is the traditional mindset of teachers and parents. Teacher has been a highly respected occupation in China's society to this day. Teachers in the old-style private schools represented the absolute authority whose power were beyond anyone else in the class; they can even bring rattan stick into the class so as to discipline the students. Parents empowered them to beat or scold the students whom could not even complain but to accept whatever the punishment was. Given this situation, this study suggests that both teachers and parents be inculcated with correct educational ideas and value the equality between teachers and students in personality. For example, lectures on

the prevention of verbal abuse could be given to enhance their understanding of the characteristics, hazards, and countermeasures of verbal abuse, so that they can be aware enough to identify and oppose verbal abuse against students.

The last one is the vocational training and assessment system for teachers. When taking vocational orientation course, teachers are trained mainly of how to develop students' academic ability and all the other abilities ultimately serve for it; however, the awareness and skills for respecting and protecting the personalities and dignity of students are excluded, which has been confirmed in this study. Besides, the prerequisite of being a teacher in China is to pass the national teaching certification test, which is open to all candidates including but not limited to those from normal universities, so before the new teachers acquire any educational philosophy and useful tactics to manage class and help students, they already have started working. In China's schools, everything relates to good score. Teachers unintentionally transfer their anxiety and pressure to students by focusing on score alone, and hereby they tend to verbally abuse students when seeing the low grades. In response, this study suggests that the existing pre-vocational and while-vocational training system for teachers should fundamentally transform and enable teachers to truly respect and care for students. Teachers should be equipped with educational philosophy, ethics, and morals so that they could consciously distinguish criticism from verbal abuse and avoid the latter based on the essence of education. And state legislative authority should revise relevant laws to completely ban any form of verbal abuse by teachers; accordingly, local educational administrations should prohibit teachers from insult to students and popularize standardized teaching language. The administration can publish a national guide including blacklist of abusive words that can help identify and avoid verbal abuse, and ensure that it is a part of teachers' vocational training. The study also advises to redesign the assessment system for teachers by evaluating how much they respect students other than teaching knowledge.

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