

# The Current Situation, Characteristics, and Countermeasures of the Verbal Abuse to Students by Elementary School Teachers: An Empirical Study of Four Provinces and Cities in China

Qiran Wang, Yang Li

Beijing Normal University, Beijing 100875, China

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**Abstract.** *The negative impact of the verbal abuse on student by the elementary school teachers is a big issue. A total of 416 students from four provinces and cities in China were enrolled in this study. We found that the occurrence rate of the verbal abuse by elementary school teachers was not high, whereas it still caused psychological trauma to students once happened by manifesting as the frustration of learning efficacy, self-confidence and interrelationship. Regarding the causes, student's poor academic performance was the major reason, and it was significantly related to students' gender, i.e., male students who had poor academic performance were far more vulnerable to be verbally abused by their teachers. Further, the study also found that students who were verbally abused by teachers were more easily bullied at school. The findings suggest that the government and schools should take joint measures to clarify the specific boundaries of teachers' verbal punishment to students and standardize their verbal behavior to get teachers respect and care for students and create a healthy learning environment.*

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**About the Author:** Qiran Wang, Faculty of Education, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, 100875, China. Email: wangqiran1917@163.com.

**Correspondence to:** Yang Li, Faculty of Education, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, 100875, China. Email: 201821010005@mail.bnu.edu.cn.

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## Introduction

**T**HE basic principle for educators is to respect and nurture students and they should follow it as their professional accomplishment. With the prohibition of both formal and informal corporal punishment in elementary and middle schools, verbal abuse is becoming the main conduit for teachers' harmful behavior towards students in China. Other countries had established child protection laws, such as the Australian Children Protection Act, the UK Children Act, the US Dignity in Schools Campaign, and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, and explicitly prohibit teachers from conducting verbal abuse. The aim of these guidelines was to establish a harmonious and safe school culture to respect the dignity of students, protect them from degrading and punitive measures, provide a guiding framework enabling teachers to listen to their views, and develop specific procedures to suspend harmful behavior or allow them to appeal. However, in China, few policies, laws, or regulations are currently available to limit teachers' verbal abuse.

Teachers should oversee the students to shape their learning, but they are equal with students. The real dignity of teachers does not come from their subjective feelings, but from students' moral affirmation, knowledge acquisition and emotional attachment. In China, teachers' verbal abuse against students currently does not violate any laws and regulations. Therefore, we need to pay attention to helping teachers to respect students and establish a good, cooperative, pleasant, and mutually trusting relationship with students.

## Literature Review

### Definitions of Verbal Abuse

In Western countries, teachers' verbal abuse had been systematically studied, and it is usually divided into physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect. Verbal abuse was defined as a type of teacher's speech mode, which produces adverse influences on students' emotional, social, cognitive and physiological functions and adaptability (Wang, 2009). Teachers use shouting, abusing and other forms of speech to incur mental and psychological abuse to students, and negatively impact students' emotional and mental health.

In China, teachers' verbal abuse was defined as the use of discriminatory and insulting words or overwhelming criticism that deprecate students' personality and judgment, and result in devitalization on students' dignity, spirit and mental health (Sun, 2008). Specifically, teacher's verbal abuse was regarded as the behavior of restricting and depriving students of their right to speak and freedom of thinking (Wang, 2009).

In this study, teachers' verbal abuse refers to the negative speech of teachers that negatively impact students' physical and mental development through reprimand, insult, and abuse during the education and teaching activities.

## Forms of Verbal Abuse

Teachers' verbal abuse shows different forms. King and Janson (2009) pointed out that it includes abusive language, slander, sarcasm, contempt, ridicule and other insulting and discriminatory language. Theoklitou et al. (2012) mentioned that it is loud yelling, coarse and rude attitude, harsh criticism, and denigration of the child's personality.

This study classified teachers' verbal abuse into two categories: (i) direct verbal abuse, i.e., a teacher directly and actively makes verbal attacks to a student, including yelling, insulting and sarcastic remarks; (ii) indirect verbal abuse, i.e., a teacher does not directly attack a student but evokes their peers to exclude them, or the teacher deliberately ignores or refuses to communicate with the student.

## Effects of Verbal Abuse

The adverse effects of teachers' verbal abuse majorly include the academic performance, physical and mental health and social interaction, in combination with its negative results like poor academic performance, damaged self-esteem, feeling of inferiority and self-closure tendency.

A student survey showed that teachers' abuse had a significantly negative effect on students' psychological function (Nearchou, 2018). An interview of six graders showed that teachers' verbal abuse worsened their relationship with teachers, even led to verbal conflicts and violent attacks. Furthermore, teacher's verbal abuse got students hated their school and classes, and sometimes led students pretend to be sick to avoid schooling (Geiger, 2017).

## Method

### Data Collection

To get a good sample size, 13 elementary schools from four different provinces were selected. In this study, random sampling was used, and 20 students were selected from each class. All survey questionnaires were filled in the class. The average time for each questionnaire was five minutes. The survey questionnaire was drafted in simplified Chinese. The questionnaire was majorly to collect (i) demographic information of the students including gender, age, location, grades and school types; (ii) variable information from the students like types of direct verbal abuse, types of indirect verbal abuse, and academic self-efficacy.. Meanwhile, semi-structured interviews were used to understand other possible issues, such as the influence of teachers' verbal abuse and the actions taken when abused by teachers, etc. From November 2018 to February 2019, 16 students from different elementary schools were interviewed.

We used SPSS and Mplus to analyze the questionnaire data. To ensure the data coverage of interviews, the respondents were not only asked to answer designated questions, but also encouraged them to talk about their input on verbal abuse (**Table 1**).

## Variables

**Table 1: Demographic Information of the Students.**

Item	Number	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	233	56.0%
Female	183	44.0%
<b>Grade</b>		
Second	47	11.3%
Third	68	16.3%
Fourth	56	13.5%
Fifth	113*	27.2%
Sixth	132	31.7%
<b>Area</b>		
East	155	37.3%
Middle	166	40.1%
West	95	23.6%
<b>Academic Performance</b>		
Poor	85	20.3%
Average	237	57.1%
Good	94	22.6%
Total	416	100%

\*: The original number herein was 133. Given the authors' correction, it is corrected to be 113.

**Table 2: Types and Reasons of Teachers' Verbal Abuse.**

<b>Types of Teachers' Verbal Abuse</b>	
Direct Verbal Abuse	Roar, ridicule, taunt
	Frighten, threaten
Indirect Verbal Abuse	Isolated, exclude
	Neglect, ignore
<b>Reasons of Teachers' Verbal Abuse</b>	
Learning Performance	Violation of classroom discipline
	Poor academic performance, wrong answers
Other Reasons	Family background, economic conditions
	Looking and dressing

**Table 3. Occurrence of Teachers' Verbal Abuse.**

Types of Teachers' Verbal Abuse	Frequency (Number/%)		
	1 Time	2-3 Times	> 3 Times
Roar, ridicule, taunt	58 (13.9%)	18 (4.3%)	15 (3.6%)
Frighten, threaten	62 (14.9%)	18 (4.3%)	12 (2.9%)
Isolated, exclude	20 (4.8%)	11 (2.6%)	8 (1.9%)
Neglect, ignore	26 (6.3%)	16 (3.8%)	9 (2.2%)

Four questions sets were designed for the dimension of “teachers’ verbal abuse”, two items including direct and indirect verbal abuse were asked. The direct verbal abuse indicates that teachers yelled at students or made fun of student such as “yelling at me” or “saying I’m stupid”, and teachers frightened me such as “punish me if I don’t perform well or telling my parents”. The indirect verbal abuse means that teachers isolated me or destroyed my classmate relationship, such as “stopping other students from playing with me”, teacher intentionally ignored me, such as “not listening to my explanation and do not care about me”. For the dimension of “reasons for teachers’ verbal abuse”, four questions were asked. Two of them were about learning performance such as “teachers scolded me because I disturbed class discipline” or “teachers scolded me because I am not good at learning”. The other two questions were other factors such as “teachers teased my family or parents” or “teachers teased my appearance or clothing” (Table 2).

Meanwhile, this study also listed topics of teachers’ positive verbal behaviors, which include “teachers often said encouraging words to me”, “teachers patiently guided me when I encountered problems”, “teachers enlightened and comforted me when I was in sad”, “teachers had a good attitude when they talked with me”, “teachers praised me in front of other students”, and “teachers praised me before other teachers or my parents”, etc. Sara (2018) found that students who were ignored or abused by teachers were more vulnerable to school bullying. Therefore, this study also dealt with the issue of school bullying, and investigated the relationship between teachers’ verbal abuse and different types of school bullying.

## Results

### Occurrence of Teachers’ Verbal Abuse

Table 3 shows that the occurrence of verbal abuse by teachers in China is relatively low, which indicated that most elementary school teachers in China abide by professional integrity. However, several students reported that they frequently suffered from teachers’ verbal abuse. Our study found that approximately 20% of students suffered from teachers’ direct verbal abuse more than once each semester, and about 10% suffered indirect

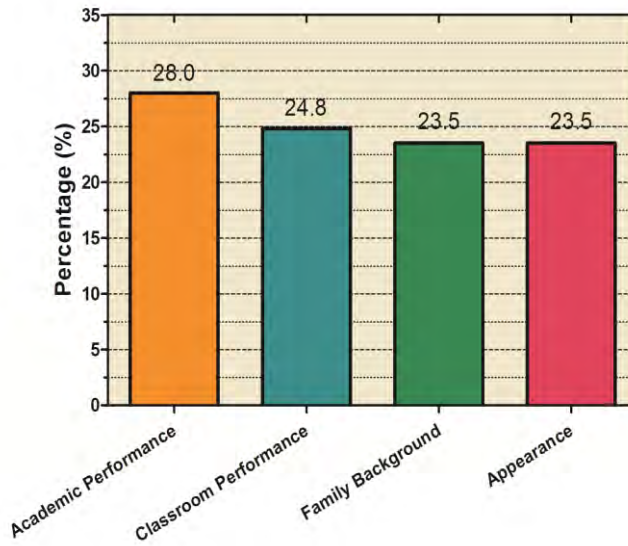


Figure 1. Reasons for Teachers' Verbal Abuse.

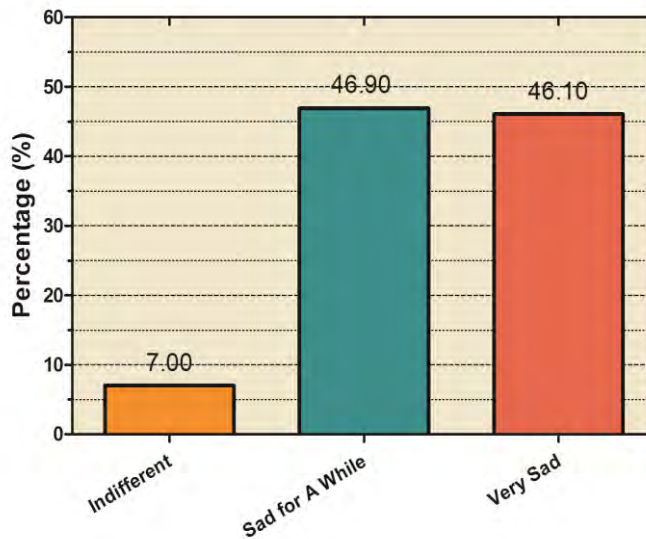


Figure 2. Influence of Teachers' Verbal Abuse.

verbal abuse more than once per semester. During the interview, it was found that almost all 16 interviewees mentioned that they had been subjected to direct or indirect verbal abuse from teachers with varying degree, some of which even were due to teachers' strong purpose of personal abuse. The following are examples of interview contents:

*Once when I failed to answer a simple question, the teacher scolded me and said I didn't use my own brain in class, and then said that I'd better quit school. (Interviewee C, second grade, Female)*

*Because I didn't do the cleaning carefully, the teacher threatened that he would move my seat to the trash next time. (Interviewee B, fifth grade, Male)*

*The teacher said I was a poor student who would have a bad impact on other students' academic performance, and he appealed to other students to stay away from me. (Interviewee A, third grade, Female)*

*The teacher always ignored the question I raised because he thought they were too simple. (Interviewee D, sixth grade, Male)*

## Reasons and Influence of Teachers' Verbal Abuse

For the analysis of the causes of teachers' verbal abuse, this study statistically calculated the proportion of individual item to the total score. The two reasons for academic performance (*example: teachers scolded and teased me because I was not good at learning; teachers scolded and yelled at me because I disturbed classroom discipline*) were respectively termed "academic performance" and "classroom performance". The total score of "academic performance 1" was 564, "academic performance 2" was 500, "other 1" was 473, and "other 2" was 474. Poor academic performance is the main reason for teachers to conduct verbal abuse (**Figure 1**). The following are examples of interview contents:

*I believe that I'm stupid. I'm not as smart as others. I always fail in the exam. The teacher also said that I was too dumb to study. (Interviewee H, fourth grade, Male)*

*Once I played games with my classmates in class, the teacher scolded me that I should be a circus clown instead of a student, and I was not qualified to study with my classmates in the same classroom. (Interviewee G, third grade, Male)*

*My parents got divorced when I was in elementary school. Once I got bad scores in exam, my teacher said that I failed because neither of my parents cared for me, and I deserved that. (Interviewee E, second grade, Female)*

*My parents run a tiny grocery store, and they are busy all day long. I caught a cold the other day and I wept my runny nose with sleeves, which happened to be seen by the teacher. She was furious and asked me if I don't have parents to take care of me. (Interviewee F, fourth grade, Female)*



During the interview, students were asked to describe the causes of teachers' verbal abuse. The following are examples of interview contents: Teachers' verbal abuse to students will cause great harm to students' mental health, which will last for a long time. According to the survey (**Figure 2**), only 7% of the respondents held an "indifferent" attitude towards teacher verbal abuse, 46.9% of the respondents would feel "sad for a while" after suffering teacher's verbal abuse, and 46.1% of the respondents would feel "very sad". In this study, we specifically designed questions for students to describe the impact of teachers' verbal abuse. After analysis, we found that teachers' verbal abuse to students formed self-doubt and decreased self-confidence in their studies. The followings are examples of interview contents:

*I'm introverted and not talkative, once the teacher asked whether I was a dumb man, which made me feel upset for a long time. After that incident, I believed that my character was defective and therefore my self-confidence was damaged. I am afraid to meet teachers and I dare not greet them. (Interviewee J, fourth grade, Female)*

*I once drew a picture in math course. The teacher grabbed my picture, showed it in front of the classroom and mocked at me, "Masterpiece, hmm? Wanna be a painter in the future? Dream on!" I was ashamed and resentful, and I even couldn't fall asleep that night. I really love painting, but he satirized me so much that I thought if I should give up painting. (Interviewee I, sixth grade, Male)*

## Characteristics of Teachers' Verbal Abuse

We used the OLS regression method to see the influencing characteristics of teachers' verbal abuse. Items of "Gender" and "Grades" passed the significant test ( $p < 0.05$ ) (**Table 4**). When compared to female students, male peers were more likely to be abused by teachers ( $B = -0.131$ ,  $S.E. = 0.055$ ); students with poor academic performance were more frequently abused verbally by teachers than those with good academic performance ( $B = -0.088$ ,  $S.E. = 0.051$ ).

Another OLS regression method was employed to examine the influencing characteristics of teachers' verbal encouragement (**Table 5**). The items "Gender", "Location" and "Academic record" passed the significant test ( $p < 0.05$ ). When compared to male students, female students were more likely to receive verbal encouragement from teachers ( $B = 0.165$ ,  $S.E. = 0.071$ ). Compared with the central and western areas, teachers in the eastern area were more likely to adopt verbal encouragements to students ( $B = -0.112$ ,  $S.E. = 0.060$ ). Students with good academic performance were more likely to receive teachers' verbal encouragement than those with poor academic performance ( $B = 0.318$ ,  $S.E. = 0.065$ ).

Teachers' verbal abuse to students was regarded as a type of bullying with unequal power (Olweus & Breivik, 2012). Studies show that teachers' verbal abuse will have a series of negative marginal effects on students, such as affecting the social relationship with their peer classmates, and reducing their self-efficacy (Brassard &

**Table 4. Characteristics of Teachers' Verbal Abuse.**

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	3.632	4	0.908	2.916	0.021
Residual	127.983	411	0.311		
Dependent Variable: Teachers' Verbal Abuse					
Items	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.
Gender	-0.131	0.055	-0.116	-2.373	0.018*
Grades	-0.016	0.020	-0.039	-0.781	0.435
Areas	0.052	0.047	0.055	1.106	0.269
Academic record	-0.088	0.051	-0.084	-1.714	0.047*
Constant	1.594	0.206		7.732	0.000

\*:  $p < 0.05$ .

**Table 5. Characteristics of Teachers' Verbal Encouragement**

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	18.225	4	4.556	8.910	0.000
Residual	210.164	411	0.511		
Dependent Variable: Characteristics of Teachers' Verbal Encouragement					
Items	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.
Gender	0.165	0.071	0.110	2.330	0.020*
Grades	-0.005	0.026	-0.009	-0.181	0.856
Areas	-0.112	0.060	-0.091	-1.869	0.042*
Academic record	0.318	0.065	0.231	4.852	0.000*
Constant	2.539	0.264		9.613	0.000

\*:  $p < 0.05$ .

Fiorvanti, 2015). In China, it is hard to shake teachers' authority, and their behaviors will be imitated by students, which will make the situation much worse. To investigate whether there is an inevitable link between teachers' verbal abuse and school bullying, we conducted a correlation analysis, and found that all types of verbal abuse have significant relationship to all types of school bullying behaviors (**Table 6**). Students who were more vulnerable to teachers' verbal abuse were more likely to be bullied by other students. This is also reflected in the interview.

**Table 6. Correlation Analysis of Teachers' Verbal Abuse and School Bullying.**

<b>Verbal Abuse School Bullying</b>	<b>Verbal Bullying</b>	<b>Social Bullying</b>	<b>Cyber Bullying</b>	<b>Physical Bullying</b>
Direct Verbal Abuse 1	0.705**	0.535**	0.477**	0.451**
Direct Verbal Abuse 2	0.693**	0.532**	0.483**	0.449**
Indirect Verbal Abuse 1	0.524**	0.564**	0.443**	0.439**
Indirect Verbal Abuse 2	0.573**	0.550**	0.414**	0.457**
N	416	416	416	416

\*\* :  $p < 0.01$ ; \* :  $p < 0.05$ .

*I don't do well in my study and my teacher often calls me a fool. Some guys in my class also call me fool in front of my classmates, which made me feel very shameful. (Interviewee D, third grade, Male)*

*The teacher said that we should make friends with the students who study well and not hang out with the students who study badly. Everyone thinks that everything the teacher says is right, so nobody wants to play with me. (Interviewee A, second grade, Female)*

## Discussion

Currently, it is extremely rare for studying teachers' verbal abuse in China through the CNKI, only 9 studies are available under the topic of "teachers' verbal abuse" or "teachers' verbal attack". It is of great value to analyze the situation and characteristics of teachers' verbal abuse within China.

Our results showed that the verbal abuse to students by elementary school teachers is not serious, but it does exist to some extent, and has a negative impact on some students, which is embodied in reducing students' learning enthusiasm and self-efficacy, and damaging students' interpersonal relationships. Direct verbal abuse is the major form for elementary school teachers, and then followed by indirect verbal abuse. Elementary school teachers conduct verbal abuse to students due to their bad academic performance or classroom performance. Especially, males with poor academic performance are more likely to be abused verbally. Furthermore, there is a strong correlation between teachers' verbal abuse and student bullying by their classmates.

## Suggestion

First, China should build up legislative rules against teachers' verbal abuse and standardize the language behavior of elementary school teachers. Our results showed that the verbal abuse by elementary school teachers occurs frequently and produced a long-lasting negative impact on students' development. It is the duty of the national legisla-

ture and the education administration to establish corresponding legal regulations over teachers' verbal abuse. It is an unavoidable responsibility for governments to ensure the healthy development of students physically and mentally. The legislature should establish and improve the legal system to prohibit teachers' verbal abuse, and intensify the revision of relevant education laws; and also should clearly add relevant provisions into Teachers Law and Compulsory Education Law to prohibit teachers' verbal abuse. The Ministry of Education of China and education administration at all levels should formulate corresponding rules and policies in order to guide and supervise teachers' language behavior, limit and eliminate teachers' verbal abuse against students.

Second, elementary schools should improve institutional culture construction and establish prevention mechanisms for teachers' verbal abuse. It is time to strengthen the construction of teachers' morality, carry out pre-vocational and vocational training for all teachers, enable teachers to establish the value of respecting and caring for students, and put an end to the verbal abuse in educating and teaching activities. Elementary schools should enhance the supervision and assessment of teachers' verbal behavior. It should be taken into consideration to see whether they use abusive words when evaluating their teaching, and directly linked with the annual evaluation, award evaluation and title evaluation, etc. Regular lectures on the prevention of verbal abuse should be given to both teachers and students to enhance their understanding of the characteristics, hazards and countermeasures of the verbal abuse. Therefore, students can consciously identify and oppose teachers' verbal abuse in their daily school life. Further, schools should establish a family-school linkage mechanism to prevent teachers' verbal abuse and facilitate the channels of parents' complaints.

For teachers, it is necessary to clarify their power of punishment, especially the reasonable boundary of teachers' speech and behavior, and guide teachers to use reasonable and civilized language. Although it was called for the "right to punitive education" and a hot debate, in the teaching behavior, it is necessary to endow the teacher with reasonable and appropriate punishment power to standardize student's learning. However, how to avoid the corporal punishment by teachers in the form of "warning" and how to grasp the limitation of teachers' power of punishment both require careful consideration and design. Similarly, it is necessary to distinguish teachers' reasonable criticism to students from their verbal violence against students, set the bottom line for teachers to discipline students, and protect teachers' right to criticize students while forbidding teachers' abusive words. Besides, we should actively carry out teacher-oriented education and training, guide teachers to establish a correct view of students, and give more emotional attention and academic support to students with poor academic performance and poor daily behavior, instead of blindly denying, rejecting or even imposing verbal violence on them.

Last but not least, for students, it is of importance to improve the relief measures for students who suffered from teachers' verbal violence to reduce its negative impact. Our results showed that only less than 5% of the students tried to report the problem and seek help. Actively carry out the thematic education to prevent verbal abuse among peers and teachers for elementary school students, and encourage elemen-

tary students to report it and seek help, and school should provide psychological counseling and emotional support to the violence to minimize the negative impact. Meanwhile, our study showed that students who suffered from teachers' verbal violence were significantly associated with bullying. This suggests that schools should carry out educational activities on the theme of fighting against school bullying, preventing teachers' verbal violence, and building up a safe and healthy campus for their development.

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