



Thai Students and Violence in Schools

Throughout 2006 and continuing into 2007, there were frequent “abnormal” occurrences in schools. Besides news about students from different vocational schools fighting with weapons, there were incidences about female students in bloody catfights and teachers harshly punishing students both physically and emotionally. This raises the question of whether schools are still safe for children.

The Culture of Using Violence to Solve Problems in Schools

Schools are an important environment for school-age children. However, studies by Dr. Pornpun Boonyaratpun found that only 59 percent of schools taught problem-solving skills without the use of violence. In 2006, there were many incidences that revealed the use of violence to solve problems in schools which shook the Thai educational circle.

In the beginning of the year, there was news about a 14-year old grade 8 female student studying in Samutprakan province who was badly beaten by 2 older female students. Her body was bruised and there was blood around her ear and left arm from bites. The older students were displeased that she was talking to a male student who was the boyfriend of one of the older students. They arranged to meet after school at a place nearby the school to discuss the situation, but the older girls later beat up the younger girl.

Approximately the same time as the above mentioned incident, 30 female high school students were involved in a fight in the middle of a market in Nakhon Sri Thammarat province, which was watched by many people. The police had to step in to stop the fighting. The cause of the fight was a dispute over a boyfriend. Soon after, there was news about female students damaging the property of a private school in Nakhon Sri Thammarat province because they were angry that a teacher had found out about some of them selling sex services and reporting it to the girls' parents.

It seems that fighting among students, especially high school students, are becoming more frequent. However, the incident that shocked Thai society was the attack on 14-15 year old students of a school in Nonthaburi province until they were terribly beaten and bruised. Most important, the incident was filmed on video clip which later became major evidence when a report was filed with the police. In addition, images and sounds of the attack were forwarded via mobile phones throughout the school to shame those involved.

Images and sounds of the girls being attacked, including hair pulling, slapping and kicking the face and head, until the assaulted fell to the ground amongst the cheers of those watching shook Thai society. As a result, we have to seriously take a look at the dangers in schools.

Following this violent incident, Mr. Chaturong Chaisaeng, the Minister of Education at that time, ordered public health researchers to find out what caused the group of female students to behave that way. Results of the psychology tests revealed that the group of female

students who were involved in the incident had characteristics of students with risks. Students with risks have low skills in solving problems and conflicts, have difficulty in controlling their emotions, lack discipline, do not respect social rules, and have family problems. From the evaluation that there is high probability that similar incidents will occur in schools in the future, Mr. Chaturong stated the strategy to solve violence among children, which was established when he was deputy prime minister, will be re-implemented.

The Change from Male Student Disputes to Female Student Disputes

In the past, only male students engaged in fights among themselves or with students from different institutions. Fights among male students, especially those from vocational schools, later increased in frequency and violence. There were more weapons, injuries and deaths, including deaths of innocent people. To solve the problem, the police, the Vocational Education Commission and the Ministry of Education had to establish a program to create unity among the different groups, organize activities to change behavior causing unrest and violence, and file court cases in serious cases.

However, the change in the faces of those involved in the disputes from male students to female students, especially high school female students, make us wonder what has happened to these female students' thinking and society.

Dr. Sompong Chitradap from the Faculty of Education, Chulalongkorn University is another person who has observed this change. He said that the past few years have been the period where female students have been given freedom. In the past, female students had to be reserved. But today, female students dare to express themselves in many areas such as dressing and dating. They try to become the center of attention in their circle by talking about their dating experiences and engage in certain activities in order to be socially accepted. Therefore, when another girl steals their boyfriend, they have to show off by slapping or cursing the other girl.

Professor Niti Aewsriwong also observed that "*what's strange is that the boxers are now women, in my time, meeting after school for fights was a male culture.*" The culture of female students has now changed. They now use male methods to deal with conflicts.

It could be said that nowadays male and female students have similar behavior, whether coercing money from friends in the classroom, gambling, organizing drug parties, or fooling around.

Thai Students in the “Slap, Hit, Kick” Cycle

Dr. Amornwit Nakhonthap, Director of Ramajitti Institute, revealed that according to the results of the research project about the situation of children and youth in each province, there are as many as 700,000 children, or 10 percent of 7 million students, who are trapped in the cycle of using violence or strength with friends. Many conditions lead the children into violent behavior including broken families, media influence which cause the children to be indifferent to violence, and social conditions that enable the children to easily access vice. If these three social conditions do not change, it can be predicted that violence in Thai society will definitely not decrease. The long-term solution to this problem is to teach children and teenagers methods to deal with violence. Schools should teach skills to peacefully resolve conflicts.

The 2006 year-end report of the situation of children and youth in each province stated that there was a trend that children, especially primary and high school children, are living further apart from their parents and have increasing risk behavior. In addition, one problem is often related to a “set of problems.” For example, if a province has a high rate of children who drink, it also has a high rate of children who watch pornography and a high rate of children who have sex. If a province has a high rate of children who make football bets, it also has a high rate of extortion and physical attacks in schools.

As a result of violence in schools, both the attackers and the assaulted students are in a cycle of short-term and long-term danger. That is, in the short-term, the assaulted students are worried and afraid of going to school, which will affect both their studies and relationships with friends and teachers. In the long-term, the students will lose self-confidence, feel worthless, and are likely to experience depression and have relationship problems in their life.

On the other hand, the attackers will have other anti-social behavior, such as willfulness and breaking the rules, in the short-term. Their studies may also be adversely affected. In the long-term, it was found that continued violent behavior would be used with their family, at the office or with society. They also have a tendency to drink alcohol, be addicted to drugs, and commit crimes.

Teachers Punishing Students and Students Bullying Each Other: Silent Violence in Schools

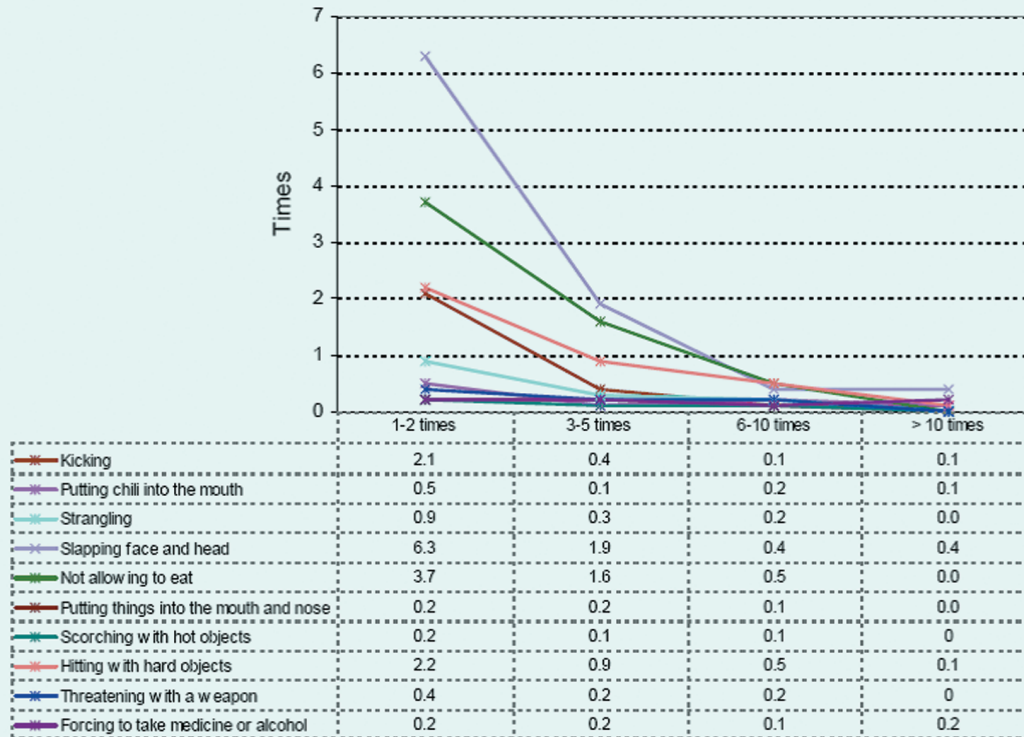
The methods used by some Thai teachers to correct students’ behavior such as hitting, pinching, kicking, slapping, pressing hot objects on the student’s body, spitting in the mouth, cursing, ridiculing, or public humiliation violate the students’ rights as well as may endanger the students. Furthermore, these methods teach the students that it is appropriate and acceptable to use violence to resolve conflicts or to make others follow your demands.

The Ministry of Education’s Regulations Concerning Punishment of Students year 2000 stated that there are 5 methods to punish students, including warnings, doing activities, suspension, putting under a bond of good behavior and expelling from school. It is forbidden to punish students using violent methods, out of spite, with anger or revenge. It is also forbidden to punish students who are sick or have emotional problems. The age of the student must also be taken into consideration.

However, the survey which was conducted during 2005-2006 in every region to study the attitude and behavior of teachers in building discipline for students indicated that 60 percent of Thai teachers still used violence in punishing students. Some forms of punishment hurt the students both physically and emotionally. Some forms of punishment also damage human pride. These include: putting cloth or things to the student’s mouth and/or nose; scorching the student’s skin with hot objects; kicking, punching, hitting with hard objects; threatening with a knife or gun; locking up in a dark room; forcing the student to take medicine or a drink mixed with alcohol to calm the student; slapping the face, head or back of the neck; or putting chili or hot or bitter tasting food into the student’s mouth (see graph on page 69).

According to the results of the research project about the situation of children and youth in each province, 747 primary school students, or 40 percent, said that they had been physically attacked. In the future, it is likely that more primary school students will be physically attacked by older students because they are considered as being under the authority of the older students. This is in line with the results of the survey about bullying in schools which was conducted during

Graph showing punishment by physical abuse and damaging pride



Source: Sombat Tapanya, 2006

February March 2006 among 3,047 students from grades 4 to 8. The results showed that bullying was high in all regions across the country. 40 percent had been bullied 2-3 times a month. The methods of bullying ranged from verbal teasing to physical attack. Other methods of bullying include spreading gossip, taking money and things, looking down on the person, and sexual harassment. It was found that the eastern region had higher rates of bullies taking money and things and threatening fellow students than other regions.

The students who are bullied often do not tell anyone about being bullied. The older the students, the less chance that they will tell anyone about being bullied. When someone is bullied, fellow students often do not get involved. This culture of silence prevents violence from being recognized and can be considered as one of the bad occurrences in schools.

Stepping out of the Cycle of Danger

Physical and emotional safety in schools is very important to the education of all students at every level. Creating a physically and emotionally safe environment in schools is a delicate matter and requires cooperation from many parties. Most recently, there was positive development in the television

industry. The show's rating (P, PG, etc.) is now indicated. This was a result of requests from many sides, especially the Ministry of Culture's Cultural Surveillance Center. Those involved in the television industry were asked to provide ratings for the TV programs in order to reduce the risk of children copying unsuitable behavior since television has great influence on children's thinking and actions. A survey about television and the use violence among youths conducted by ABAC Poll during June 2006 found that "what is worrisome about Thai children and youth is that they like to use violence which may be the result of copying violent scenes viewed from soap operas, cartoons, movies, news and commercials in television."

In addition, there were recommendations for schools to provide public places for children to engage in social activities to help others and to receive love and appreciation in return. This will provide opportunities for children to express themselves and be accepted by people around them.

As a result of violence in schools throughout the previous year, the National Health Foundation and the Thai Health Promotion Foundation proposed that the Ministry of Education help promote "Schools without Violence" in 2007 so that schools will be safe places where children can happily study.