



The context of school-based cyberbullying prevention in Vietnamese public schools: A cross-sectional study

My-Hanh Mai¹

Thien-Vu Giang²

Xuan-Dieu Dang³

Duc-Hoi Dinh^{4*}



(*) Corresponding Author

¹Psychology Department, Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, No.280 An Duong Vuong St., Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

¹Email: hanhmm@hcmue.edu.vn

²Email: vuvt@hcmue.edu.vn

³Political Department, Hue University of Education, No.34 Le Loi St., Thua Thien Hue Province, Vietnam.

³Email: xuandieuhsphue@gmail.com

⁴Faculty of Preschool Education, Thai Nguyen University of Education, No.20 Luong Ngoc Quyen St., Thai Nguyen Province, Vietnam.

⁴Email: hoidd@tmeu.edu.vn

Abstract

Cyberbullying is a form of violence that has been present in schools for a long time and negatively impacts the mental health of students. Different countries have different strategies for avoiding cyberbullying. However, research on school-based cyberbullying prevention is limited in Southeast Asian developing countries. This study aims to explore the current implementation of school-based cyberbullying prevention in public schools in a developing country. The framework of prevention programs is based on three aspects: (1) Developing curricula on how to behave when being a victim of cyberbullying. (2) Strengthening the students' skills to deal with cyberbullying. (3) Promulgating specific provisions in the legal document on handling cyberbullying. School-based cyberbullying prevention among students in public schools is currently a research gap because of the limitations in the management of students using the internet and educational policies. This is a cross-sectional study that surveyed 400 participants who are Vietnamese teachers, administrators and school psychologists. The results show that the limitations of school-based cyberbullying prevention for Vietnamese students include professional knowledge, practical experience and personnel in charge of this work. This constraint has resulted in an upsurge in incidents of cyberbullying in Vietnam. The findings add to the important evidence on cyberbullying prevention in a developing country that is working to research and develop an appropriate school-based cyberbullying prevention strategy.

Keywords: Cyberbullying prevention program, Cyberbullying, Public school, School psychology, School-based cyberbullying prevention.

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Contents

1. Introduction	675
2. Literature Review	675
3. Methodology	676
4. Results	677
5. Discussion	679
6. Conclusion	680
References	680

Contribution of this paper to the literature

This study presents the limitations of school-based cyberbullying prevention for a student in a developing country in term of the professional knowledge, practical experience and personnel in charge of this work. This constraint has resulted in an upsurge in incidents of cyberbullying in Vietnam.

1. Introduction

Cyberbullying is a form of violence with more severe consequences than other forms of school violence (Wang, Nansel, & Iannotti, 2011). Several instances of students being cyberbullied and committing suicide are currently being reported in the media particularly after the COVID-19 epidemic (Barlett, Simmers, Roth, & Gentile, 2021; Kee, Al-Anesi, & Al-Anesi, 2022). Cyberbullying is a dangerous form of bullying because its consequences include not only physical injuries but also impacts on social relationships, learning and mental health, thereby causing severe psychological distress (Beran & Li, 2007). According to Beale and Hall (2007), cyberbullying consists of six common expressions: (1) Harassment (2) Defamation (3) Distress (4) Impersonation, distribution and fraud (5) Cyberstalking (6) Boycott and isolation in cyberspace. Espelage, Rao, and Craven (2012) identify text messages, photographs, videos, phone calls, emails, chat rooms and websites as prevalent forms of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying includes not only offensive, threatening, mocking or sexually abused messages or emails but also the use of names, personal information and images on the internet to mock or harm others in accordance with the advancement of science and technology (Landstedt & Persson, 2014). Cyberbullying can also be expressed by spreading false information and inciting others to have negative behavior and attitudes towards the person being bullied (Campbell, Slee, Spears, Butler, & Kift, 2013). A special form of cyberbullying stalking or terrorism in cyberspace has also become common in modern society (Egeberg, Thorvaldsen, & Rønning, 2016).

Cyberbullying has been reported to have a long-term negative mental effect on those who experience it (Kaiser, Kyrrestad, & Fossum, 2020). Therefore, prevention and intervention strategies for cyberbullying are essential for every school and educational sector (Barkoukis, Lazuras, Ourda, & Tsorbatzoudis, 2016). These strategies are suggested to keep students from engaging in cyberbullying or to help them cope with the negative impacts of school-based cyberbullying. Various theoretical frameworks on cyberbullying prevention were developed in terms of theory and practice globally with specific characteristics of psychological prevention in accordance with the policy and responsibility context of each country (Campbell et al., 2013; Fossum, Skokauskas, Handegård, Hansen, & Kyrrestad, 2023; Li, Wang, Martin-Moratinos, Bella-Fernández, & Blasco-Fontecilla, 2022; Tanrikulu, 2018). Although there is a great deal of information about cyberbullying prevention programs in scientific data systems, most literature reviews are not detailed. This makes in-depth studies on how to improve the quality of these programs. According to Tanrikulu (2018), unless the theoretical mechanisms behind these prevention program or strategies can be clearly described to teachers as well as policy-makers, researchers cannot explain how their program works to impact cyberbullying behavior or prevent this issue effectively. Therefore, there are still many research gaps on school-based cyberbullying prevention (SBCP) for students especially in the public education system where the problem of managing students using the internet is difficult because of the characteristics of the quantity and educational policies.

Vietnam as a developing country had initial studies on cyberbullying (Ho, Gu, & Wang, 2022; Le, 2020; Nguyen, Nakamura, Seino, & Vo, 2020; Nguyen, 2017; Tran, Weiss, & Cole, 2009; Tran, Weiss, & Cole, 2014). There have been over 68.17 million people using internet services in Vietnam since January 2020. High school students are the main users of the internet. According to Oanh (2021), 7% of students reported that they have cyberbullied others online while 14% of them were victims of cyberbullying. The most common types of victimization reported by students were harassment including pranks, silent phone calls or insults on instant messaging and websites. There were not any significant gender differences in cyberbullying or being victimized by cyberbullied females. However, students are rarely taught how to use the internet safely (Tran, Shukri, & Do, 2018). There have been several studies to provide strategies to avoid cyberbullying in Vietnam.

1.1. The Significance of the Study

Research on the limitations of cyberbullying prevention by educators, teachers or school psychologists is lacking. Therefore, this study was conducted to find out the current context of the implementation of SBCP for Vietnamese students. The significance of this study is to reveal the limitations and peculiarities of implementing this work in Vietnamese public schools and suggest prevention strategies that are appropriate to policy and the responsiveness of teachers in a developing country.

2. Literature Review

Similar findings have already been stated in numerous countries addressing the cyberbullying experience or its impact on students' psychological well-being. Vazsonyi, Machackova, Sevcikova, Smahel, and Cerna (2012) found minor variations in cyberbullying experiences among students from 25 European countries. Many studies have confirmed the detrimental influence of cyberbullying on the mental health of children, adolescents or students (Fossum et al., 2023; Li et al., 2022). Stress, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, suicidal thoughts or attempts, self-harm and social withdrawal were mentioned and reported as the negative consequences for those who experienced cyberbullying at least once in their homes or schools (Campbell, Spears, Slee, Butler, & Kift, 2012; Campbell et al., 2013; Kaiser et al., 2020; Lucas-Molina, Pérez-Albéniz, Solbes-Canales, Ortuño-Sierra, & Fonseca-Pedrero, 2022). Physical health and academic performance were also found to be negatively impacted by cyberbullying in victimized adolescents (Egeberg et al., 2016; Kaiser et al., 2020; Låftman, Modin, & Östberg, 2013). SBCP or activities on cyberbullying prevention are developed and implemented to reduce the negative impacts of this phenomenon based on the consequences and experiences of cyberbullying. However, the success of SBCP varies in different countries due to the influence of several socio-demographic characteristics (Li et al., 2022;

Navarro, Yubero, & Larrañaga, 2015; Santos, Mateos-Pérez, Cantero, & Gámez-Guadix, 2021; Sorrentino, Baldry, Farrington, & Blaya, 2019).

Many countries have made efforts against cyberbullying in schools. Korea enacted a law against school violence and bullying, Australia has a National Framework for safe schools, Sweden has an antidiscrimination law and the education law amendment banning all forms of discrimination and bullying in schools, Chile has a school violence act in education, the Philippines also enacted an anti-bullying act that addresses both traditional and cyberbullying, Singapore has an anti-harassment law, etc. (Heyeres et al., 2021; Young, Michael, & Smolinski, 2018). Although there are no specific laws in the United States prohibiting violence and bullying. School psychologists have also examined and proposed solutions to cyberbullying prevention and intervention. (Li et al., 2022; Selkie, Fales, & Moreno, 2016). Espelage et al. (2012) have found evidence that schools can play an important role in teaching students' healthy online behaviors. The researchers trained teachers to teach 50-minute lessons per week, spanning 41 weeks over three years. Students learned problem-solving skills such as relating from another perspective and offering multiple solutions. Students explored ways to help them manage their emotions. Students learned about the dangers of substance abuse for victimized children. Espelage et al. (2012) data show that according to students, these interventions reduce both traditional bullying and cyberbullying by 20% to 40%.

According to Strein and Koehler (2008), aspects of a successful program include program type and outputs, enough length, suitable time, socio-cultural relevance, overview, combination of diverse methods, availability of books, documents, structured tutorials, evidence of effectiveness and output evaluation. Previous studies on the SBCP focused on the following main contents: (1) Developing curricula on how to behave when you are a victim of cyberbullying. (2) Strengthening the students' skills to deal with cyberbullying. (3) Promulgating specific provisions in the legal document on handling cyberbullying. In addition, some applications and social networks also actively develop policies to protect users from cyberbullying. This theoretical and practical research evidence on SBCP is the basis for the research team to inherit and develop our self-developed assessment tool in the context of cyberbullying prevention in this study. This study is conducted to explore the context of SBCP in Vietnamese public schools based on the stated research gap in cyberbullying behavior and SBCP within the context of Vietnamese public schools.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study Design

This study aimed to understand the context of school-based cyberbullying prevention in Vietnamese schools. Therefore, the authors designed a cross-sectional study using the quantitative method of data collection from the self-developed questionnaire. The researchers designed an investigative study with a targeted participant who is in charge of implementing the SBCP in Vietnamese public high schools including teachers, administrators and school psychologists because the education system in Vietnam is mainly public.

Our self-developed questionnaire consists of two parts: Part 1 is the participants' demographic information, including gender, job position, working seniority and working area. Part 2 is the self-developed content based on previous findings from the SBCP theoretical framework and practice rated on 5 levels: 1) never, 2) rarely, 3) sometimes, 4) often, 5) very often. The questionnaire includes the following questions: teacher's perception of SBCP definition (4 items), teacher's perception of the behavior expressions of cyberbullying in students (11 items), the contents of SBCP have been implemented (15 items), the forms of SBCP have been implemented (10 items), the frequency of SBCP in 1 academic year (4 items) and personnel in charge of implementing SBCP for students at the working school (7 items).

The pilot test is conducted through a primary data with 100 teachers (50 in the Southern and 50 in the Central of Vietnam) collected by convenient sampling with a Cronbach alpha of 0.822. The reliability of the pilot questionnaire ensures the validity of this self-developed questionnaire when surveying Vietnamese participants. The official questionnaire includes 55 items: 4 demographic items (item 1 to 4) and 51 school-based cyberbullying-related prevention items (item 5 to 55).

3.2. Participants

400 Vietnamese teachers from three regions were recruited by convenient sampling. Table 1 presents the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1. Demographic information of participants

Demographic information		Frequency	%
Gender	Male	106	26.5%
	Female	294	73.5%
Working seniority	Under 5 years	124	31%
	From 5 to 10 years	103	25.8%
	From 10 to 15 years	96	24%
	Over 15 years	77	19.3%
Job position	Teacher	290	72.5%
	School administrator	60	15%
	School psychologist	50	12.5%
Working area	Northern Vietnam	62	15.5%
	Central Vietnam	88	22%
	Southern Vietnam	250	62.5%
Overall		N=400	100%

The researcher designed an email proposal with full information about the project (study aims, questionnaire content, confidentiality, choice of participation, withdrawal option and contact details of the research team). Then, this proposal was sent to the teachers through their working email to invite and inform them about the study. The survey process took place online through Google Forms. The agreement to participate is indicated by the consent

that appeared at the end of the questionnaire. When the participants approved the submission of the completed questionnaire, they agreed to take part in the study and accepted our ethical principles. Only fully completed questionnaires were included in the final analysis. The survey took place entirely online from September 2022 to December 2022. The results received many positive responses with 400 valid answer sheets.

3.3. Data Analysis

The research team used descriptive statistics by SPSS software (version 26.0) to summarize the data and information in the sample after obtaining the official data. We used descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage) to explore the current context of preventing cyberbullying in Vietnamese high schools. Responses were rated on 5 levels (1 to 5) and coded with a Likert-5 scale (see Table 2). We calculate the percentage of the participant's selections with the offered items when using multiple-choice sentences and discuss it accordingly.

Table 2. Coding data

Mean range	Level	Description
4.24 - 5.00	5	Very often expressing cyberbullying or implementing SBCP for students.
3.43 - 4.23	4	Regularly expressing cyberbullying or implementing SBCP for students.
2.62 - 3.42	3	Occasionally expressing cyberbullying or implementing SBCP for students.
1.81 - 2.61	2	Rarely expressing cyberbullying or implementing SBCP for students.
1.00 - 1.80	1	Never express cyberbullying or implementing SBCP for students.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

The study was approved and supervised strictly by the ethics committee of the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (number B2021-SPS-06) and the declaration of Helsinki.

4. Results

The results in the context of SBCP implementation in Vietnamese public schools are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Participants' perceptions of the SBCP definition

SBCP definition	N	%
I5. SBCP is a school-based prevention program to raise awareness and coping skills about cyberbullying. Students and all those involved with them should be fully aware of cyberbullying and related issues.	138	34.5%
I6. SBCP is an action to eliminate the unwanted potential of using indirect forms of bullying through utilities and applications on the internet to intentionally hurt or threaten the victims.	129	32.3%
I7. SBCP is a system of specific tasks and solutions to eliminate the potential causes or undesirable situations of cyberbullying and develop a safe school environment.	86	21.5%
I8. SBCP provides mental health care, skills training and guidance for students to recognize cyberbullying so that it can be effectively prevented.	47	11.8%
Overall	400	100%

SBCP is a school-based prevention program to raise awareness and coping skills about cyberbullying. Students and all those involved with students should be fully aware of cyberbullying and related issues accounting for 34.5% (with N = 138). This result is consistent with the listed theoretical framework. However, more than 65% of participants do not comprehend what the SBCP is.

Table 4. Participants' perceptions of the behavior expressions of cyberbullying in students

Cyberbullying expressions	M	SD	Level
I9. Posting an unpleasant text, image or video of someone on the internet.	3.86	1.129	3
I10. Sending messages through the phone or social networks with disparaging intentions and using sensitive words when talking about someone.	4.12	1.582	3
I11. Creating a group or anti-society to spread bad news about someone.	4.01	1.094	3
I12. Saying a bad trait or a point you are not satisfied with about anyone openly on social networks.	4.09	1.194	3
I13. Blocking or not allowing someone to join the group or fan page on the social network.	3.89	1.892	3
I14. Discussing disparagingly or using the 'angry' button on someone's post on social networks.	3.98	1.754	3
I15. Posting nude pictures or clips on social networks.	3.65	1.539	3
I16. Posting articles on social networks to threaten or warn someone.	3.76	1.249	3
I17. Cheating or stealing someone's account to get their information and publishing it on social networks.	4.11	1.643	3
I18. Giving someone a bad name or nickname in online comments and text messages.	4.20	1.544	3
I19. Putting things and spreading false information about someone on social networks or by phone.	3.77	1.573	3
Overall	3.95	1.472	3

According to Table 4, the participants' overall mean perception of the level of cyberbullying expressions among students reached 3.95. All expressions of cyberbullying were assessed on a regular level. The majority of participants said that the students' common expression of cyberbullying is "giving someone a bad name or nickname in online comments and text messages" with M = 4.77 corresponding to the degree of very often expressing cyberbullying.

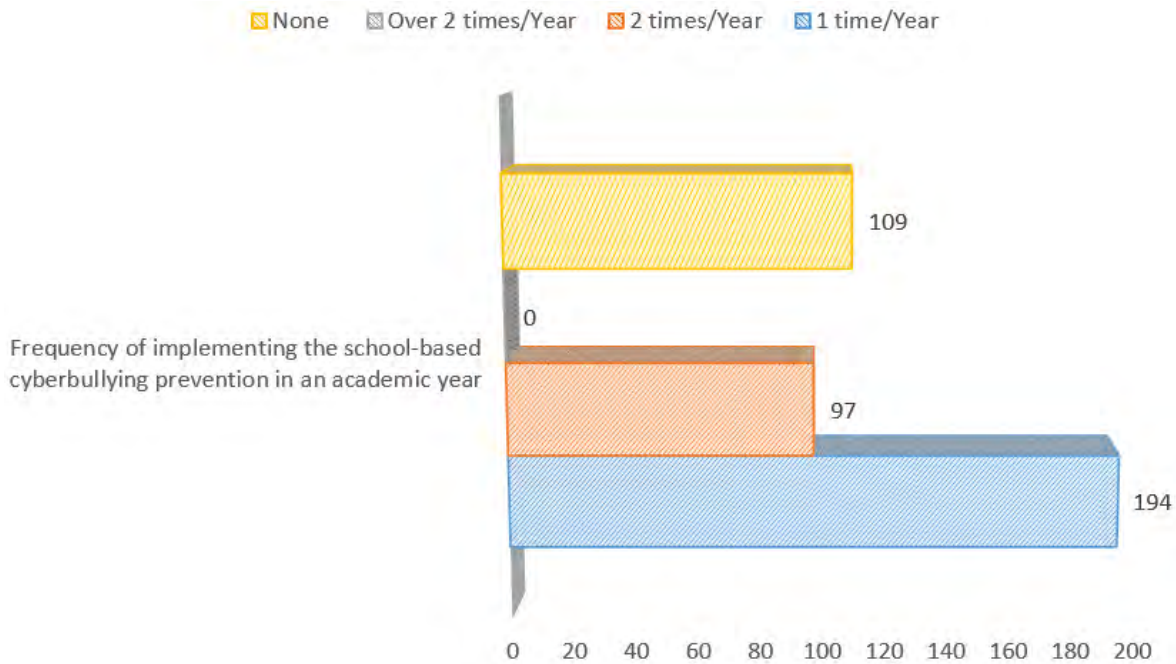


Figure 1. The frequency of SBCP in 1 academic year.

Figure 1 shows that the frequency of implementing SBCP once in an academic year accounted for 48.4% (with N = 194) implementing SBCP twice in an academic year accounted for 24.3% (with N = 97) and not implemented accounted for 27.3% (with N = 109). The frequency of this deployment is too low and unlikely to be effective in preventing cyberbullying among students.

Person in charge of implementing the school-based cyberbullying prevention

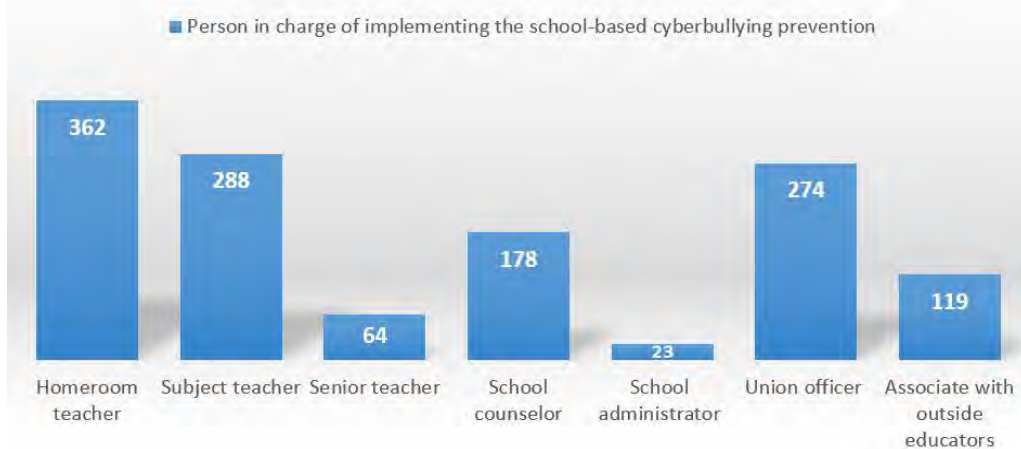


Figure 2. Person in charge of implementing the SBCP in Vietnamese public schools.

Figure 2 shows that all educational forces inside and outside the school are involved in the SBCP for students. The person with the highest responsibility is the class teacher, a force directly responsible for and close to the students in school. However, the role of the school psychologist remains obscure in this SBCP work.

Table 5. The contents of SBCP have been implemented in Vietnamese public schools

The contents of SBCP	M	SD	Level
I31. Be aware of cyberbullying.	2.78	1.109	3
I32. How to effectively deal with cyberbullying.	2.54	1.295	2
I33. Store evidence of cyberbullying.	1.90	1.294	2
I34. Ask the cyberbully to stop.	1.97	1.200	2
I35. Seek help from others when being cyberbullied.	2.14	1.231	2
I36. Protect personal information and accounts.	2.34	1.102	2
I37. Effective use of existing technology tools.	2.21	1.194	2
I38. Overcome the mental trauma of being cyberbullied.	1.09	1.231	1
I39. Cope with uncomfortable emotions when being cyberbullied.	1.56	1.009	2
I40. Communicate and behave politely on social networks.	2.49	1.104	2
I41. Self-protect when participating in cyberspace.	1.85	1.209	2
I42. Examine the benefits and drawbacks of being online.	1.99	1.532	2
I43. Legal and ethical issues in cyberspace.	2.01	1.984	2
I44. Connect family, school and community in supporting students to participate in a safe cyberspace.	2.33	1.650	2
I45. Build a network of experts to support and take care of mental health for students when participating in cyberspace.	1.45	1.549	1
Overall	2.04	1.313	2

Table 5 shows that the overall mean of implementing SBCP content is 2.04. SBCP content is rarely educated in Vietnamese public schools currently.

Table 6. The forms of SBCP have been implemented in Vietnamese public schools

The forms of SBCP	M	SD	Level
I46. Outdoor educational activity	4.18	1.198	3
I47. Indoor educational activity	2.14	1.472	2
I48. Extra educational activity	2.33	1.582	2
I49. Club educational activity	2.56	1.287	2
I50. Extracurricular activities	3.89	1.294	2
I51. Integrating into life skills lessons	1.80	1.012	1
I52. Integrating into subjects' lessons	1.98	1.284	2
I53. Integrating in-class activities	1.83	1.542	2
I54. School counselling	1.90	1.864	2
I55. Communicating by posters, bulletin boards, flyers, etc.	2.17	1.983	2
Overall	2.48	1.452	2

According to Table 6, the context of SBCP implementing forms is scored as "rarely" with an overall mean score of 2.48. It is worth noting that life skills lessons have the lowest mean. Life skills education is an important foundation for providing necessary skills as well as preventing mental problems for students. However, practical content such as cyberbullying prevention has not been integrated is a major limitation that needs to be reconsidered.

5. Discussion

This cross-sectional study focused on exploring the context of implementing school-based cyberbullying prevention in Vietnamese public schools. We found that the current implementation of SBCP was limited in terms of professional knowledge, practicing experience and personnel in charge by surveying questionnaires on a group of 400 teachers from three regions of Vietnam. Most of the SBCP programs in Vietnam were carried out spontaneously according to the educational needs of schools and have not been based on any theoretical or practical evidence. These limitations caused a lack of understanding among teachers, administrators and school psychologists about cyberbullying and the appropriate cyberbullying prevention measures. Our finding contributes to previous findings on the differences in the context of cyberbullying prevention across countries. Each country will have different SBCP policies appropriate to the social, cultural and educational context (Fossum et al., 2023; Kaiser et al., 2020; Lucas-Molina et al., 2022). In addition, our research also found that the context of SBCP implementation in Vietnam has many limitations in the theoretical framework for developing appropriate SBCPs.

According to Espelage et al. (2012); Strein and Koehler (2008) and Li et al. (2022), SBCP competence involves understanding the SBCP concept and definition and cyberbullying behaviour manifestation. Previous research has also indicated that in order to avoid cyberbullying, SBCP implementers must be adequately and sufficiently informed of the difficulties listed above before implementing them in their schools. Our results indicated that: Firstly, the participants were not fully aware of the SBCP definition and secondly, participants were quite aware of the behavior expression of cyberbullying as well as the frequency of this expression regularly. Theoretically, this finding is not relevant because if participants are not aware enough of the SBCP framework, how can they recognize and evaluate the behavioral expressions of this phenomenon? In terms of practice, cyberbullying prevention practice will easily become subjective and unscientific without fully understanding the basic concept of SBCP. This is a shortcoming in Vietnamese teachers', administrators', and school psychologists' perceptions that they must overcome and appropriately update theoretical frameworks in order to successfully adopt SBCP.

The majority of SBCP activities are conducted in response to regulatory instructions from school administrators or to meet the requirements of students or parents about cyberbullying at the time the trigger events occur. Typically, the frequency of implementation of SBCP is mostly once per academic year or even no implementation at all. Regarding the contents of SBCP, it is similar to the lack of teaching and educating students at school. Knowledge and skills related to recognizing and responding to cyberbullying, seeking support, protecting personal account information, coping with and overcoming mental trauma from being bullied, safe and civilized communication on social networks, the law and ethics of participating in cyberspace, or simply how to protect yourself when participating in the online environment are rarely mentioned in the educational program or activities in Vietnamese public schools. Regarding the forms of SBCP implementation, the 10 types of educational activities suitable to the Vietnamese context are rarely carried out. The most common form of implementation is life skill lessons which have not been implemented in Vietnam yet. In the Asian region (Santos et al., 2021; Tran et al., 2018) or other developed countries (Heyeres et al., 2021; Selkie et al., 2016; Sorrentino et al., 2019), skill classes and learning processes that focus on developing students' competencies and skills are an important foundation for the successful prevention of cyberbullying. Vietnam has not properly understood and successfully implemented this basic problem. This context raises the issue of strengthening training, fostering and monitoring cyberbullying prevention practices in Vietnam as well as consulting with experienced international experts to be able to practice successfully.

The third limitation that makes the SBCP ineffective in Vietnamese schools is the faculty in charge of the SBCP. According to SBCPs that have been effectively implemented worldwide, school psychologists or school counsellors who are well-trained in cyberbullying prevention are in charge (Campbell et al., 2013; Fossum et al., 2023; Kaiser et al., 2020; Li et al., 2022; Lucas-Molina et al., 2022). However, both of these professionals in Vietnam are still not officially recognized and have no ethical standards or professional practice (Huynh & Giang, 2021) because the shortage of qualified personnel in charge of this work in high schools has led to the "assignment of extra tasks" to teachers at the school causing them to fall into a state of overload and professional burnout. SBCP has not been able to be successfully and effectively implemented in Vietnamese public schools.

5.1. Limitations

This study has several limitations in addition to the above findings. First, this is a cross-sectional study, so there will be limitations on the nature and depth of the context of cyberbullying prevention in Vietnamese public schools during the restructuring of national and international education. Second, the data was collected by using convenience sampling in the three main regions of Vietnam. These data could limit the generalizability of the results on a national scale and require expansion in the research area especially in urban areas. Third, we used self-developed questionnaires that have other potential limitations including recall, non-response and social desirability bias. Finally, the factors affecting the capacity of the educational forces to prevent cyberbullying have not been mentioned in this study. Therefore, we expect future studies on cyberbullying prevention or SBCP in Vietnam in developing countries to inherit and propose appropriate strategies.

6. Conclusion

The results of a cross-sectional study on SBCP with 400 participants showed that Vietnamese public schools currently have not successfully implemented SBCP for students. Three limitations were found: First, the participants were not fully aware of the SBCP definition, behavior expression of cyberbullying and the frequency of this expression regularly. Second, the biggest limitation in school psychology practice and cyberbullying prevention in Vietnamese public schools was the practice experience. Most SBCP actions are taken in response to regulatory directives regarding cyberbullying at the moment when trigger events occur without specific training or professional supervision. Third, the implementers are not qualified with regard to cyberbullying prevention because the shortage of qualified personnel in charge of this work has led to the “assignment of extra tasks” to teachers at the school causing them burnout and failed the SBCP implementation. These findings have contributed to the increase in the cases of students being cyberbullied or engaged in cyberbullying behavior in Vietnam. However, it cannot be subjectively denied that school' efforts to prevent cyberbullying through topics such as indoor and outdoor educational activities, extracurricular activities, club activities, integrated life skills lessons, integrated in-subject lessons, integrated in-class activities, etc. are ineffective but the approach as well as the implementation team do not have appropriate professional competence leading to the context of ineffectiveness.

6.1. Recommendation

The findings in this study are an important practical foundation to design an SBCP for public school students based on inheriting previous achievements overcoming existing limitations in professional knowledge, practical experience and assigning appropriate personnel in charge. Moreover, this study complements the system of cross-sectional studies on cyberbullying behavior prevention in developing countries to promote applied studies and possible measures to contribute to the widespread development of the SBCP framework in a public educational setting.

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