

Exploring Elements Linked to School Bullying in China: A Comprehensive Review

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Abstract. This review seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of factors associated with school bullying on an individual level and societal level in China. Several important trends in the field have been identified. These include the findings that experiences of childhood maltreatment, mental health, gender, and school types are positively associated with school bullying. On the contrary, strong teacher-student bonds, a communal atmosphere within the school, and high academic achievement serve as safeguards against school bullying. Despite the substantial body of research, research on the nationwide occurrence of school bullying, particularly in less developed regions of China, is still insufficient. Additionally, a notable constraint in existing studies is their reliance on cross-sectional data, which hinders the establishment of causal relationships. These discoveries carry significant implications for forthcoming investigations into school bullying within China and for the development of effective school-based interventions.

Keywords: School bullying, China, childhood maltreatment, risk factors, protective factors.

1. Introduction

Research in school bullying and bullying penetration has attracted widespread attention in China. Different studies across the country have found that the reported incidence of experiencing traditional school bullying spans from 2% to 66% for victims, and stands at 34% for perpetrators [1]. This review focuses on studies that have identified factors associated with school bullying, including two categories: risk factors and protective factors. Risk factors refer to characteristics at biological, psychological, family, community, or cultural levels that elevate the chances of participating in school bullying. These may include experiences of childhood maltreatment, school climate, gender, and mental health issues.

Conversely, protective factors refer to traits linked with a reduced likelihood of engagement in school bullying. Understanding the associated factors with school bullying is crucial for providing social support for students who are involved in bullying and for schools to address this issue through various types of interventions. This subject holds great significance because of its influence on the physical and mental well-being of Chinese youth. Despite numerous studies, there remains a lack of research on the general causes of bullying on a national scale. Additionally, it is essential to note that cross-sectional studies cannot prove causality. Therefore, the factors mentioned in the review are only confirmed to be associated with school bullying. In the subsequent sections, this paper will first delve into the risk factors for bullying in Chinese schools, including factors such as childhood maltreatment, social climate, gender, and mental health issues, followed by protective factors against school bullying such as teacher-student relationships, collective culture, and academic performances.

2. Risk Factors

2.1. Early-Life Abuse and Neglect

Childhood maltreatment encompasses a range of abusive, neglectful, or exploitative behaviors perpetrated by parents or caregivers that can cause harm to a child's well-being [2]. Several studies provided evidence supporting the connection between bullying behavior and family-level elements. These included strained parent-child relationships, punitive disciplinary measures, psychologically controlling behaviors, and insufficient parental oversight [3]. Broadly speaking, experiencing childhood maltreatment can heighten the likelihood of a student becoming entangled in school bullying.

Recent research shows that child abuse is a significant cause of school bullying. Male students who have encountered physical or psychological abuse face a two to three times greater likelihood of being victims of

bullying than mere observers. Similarly, female students who have experienced physical abuse exhibit a sixty to ninety percent higher risk of being ensnared in school bullying. This research unequivocally establishes child abuse as a prominent individual factor contributing to victimization by school bullies. The authors argue that children subjected to physical or emotional abuse in their homes or elsewhere tend to exhibit submissive traits rather than retaliatory behaviors, rendering them more susceptible to bullying in a school environment. Abused youths are more likely to engage in aggressive conduct and bully others [4]. Further research also has proven that only abuse is substantially related to bullying victimization across all forms of child maltreatment and school bullying behaviors [5].

As indicated by Shuqing Xu et al., parental bias is correlated with an increase in children's levels of anxiety and hostility. Adolescent aggression is associated with familial risk factors, encompassing insufficient parental oversight, severe disciplinary measures, and instances of family violence. The likelihood of bullying escalates in situations marked by sibling discord. The study reveals that a loving parenting approach helps shield kids from bullying. However, almost half of the respondents' parents used harsh discipline, intrusive supervision, and partiality toward their children [6,7]. Moreover, it is found that the rates of individuals who were victims of bullies and victims of familial violence over their lifetimes were 45.3% and 30.4%, respectively. These percentages are comparable to prior studies on the intersection of bullying and domestic violence's impact on children. After adjusting for other factors, the alarming correlation rate and the findings of structured logistic regressions support the assertion that exposure to familial violence is the strongest predictor of exposure to bullying. This finding is consistent with past research showing that children who had intimate partner violence or childhood abuse were more likely to experience peer bullying [8].

A recent study centered on adolescents in Anhui province, China, contends that child abuse is linked with engagement in different roles within school bullying, encompassing perpetrators, targets, and those who experience both. These findings align with prior research indicating a correlation between child mistreatment and bullying. Significantly, both emotional and physical neglect exhibit connections with school bullying. The influence of childhood neglect on school bullying may parallel that of childhood abuse [2]. Furthermore, a study conducted in Guangdong province, China, provides additional evidence that parental neglect can cause a deficiency in emotional support, which play a role in school bullying. Additionally, it is crucial to emphasize that open and effective communication between parents and children diminishes the likelihood of victimization. When students can openly discuss their concerns with their parents, they are more likely to seek and find more effective solutions [9].

2.2. School Environment

School climate, encompassing factors like peer relationships, the overall school environment, and teacher engagement, represents prevalent risk factors for both perpetrating bullying and experiencing victimization. A recent report indicates that students attending primary schools are more susceptible to experiencing bullying compared to their counterparts in middle, high, and vocational schools. Specifically, high school students demonstrate the lowest likelihood of being bullied. The rates of reported perpetration and witnessing of bullying incidents mirror each other, although there is no meaningful statistical distinction between vocational schools and primary schools in perpetration rates, nor between middle schools and primary schools in witnessing rates. Surprisingly, students in esteemed schools face a higher risk of being bullied and witnessing bullying, challenging the assumption that students in prestigious schools tend to exhibit better behavior [10]. However, it is important to note that this research's sample primarily consisted of adolescents from urban areas. Given the significant urban-rural divide in China, future studies encompassing representative students on a nationwide scale are warranted.

Another study contends that although school type does not emerge as a predominant factor in the final model, victimization rates are lower in schools with bullying education programs. There is no significant correlation between any of the school-level characteristics and perpetration [6].

2.3. Gender

Many studies have indicated that gender is an important factor. It is suggested that male students are more prone to engage in school bullying in comparison to their female counterparts [1,3,4,6,7]. Moreover, male students in middle and high schools exhibited a higher propensity for overtly physical forms of aggression, while female students were more inclined to encounter non-physical forms of bullying, specifically verbal harassment [3]. Female students tend to be more prevalent in the pure bully category, while male students are more likely to assume the roles as both aggressors and targets [4].

Moreover, research has highlighted distinct impacts of parenting approaches on male and female students in China. Physical coercion was linked to bullying behavior in male students, whereas psychological control could be linked with bullying in female students. This discrepancy arises from the greater likelihood of boys experiencing physical discipline within the Chinese cultural context [3].

2.4. Mental Health

Mental health issues within school settings have surfaced as both the causes and consequences of bullying and peer victimization in China. Children who identify as victims of bullying often exhibit internalizing behaviors, including depression, reduced self-esteem, and feelings of social isolation [3].

A recent investigation involving middle and high school students in China revealed that, when contrasted with their uninvolved peers, students exhibiting anxiety symptoms, engaging in non-suicidal self-injury, or experiencing suicidal thoughts were more inclined to participate in school bullying. This group also faced an elevated likelihood of transitioning into roles of both bullies and victims [9]. The prevalence rate of bullying was also positively correlated with a history of physical or mental disorder history, suicide attempts, and depression [10]. Recent studies have indicated that adolescents who contemplated suicide within the last month were more prone to reporting instances of being victimized through bullying at school [1]. Additionally, it was found that engaging in school bullying was found to be linked with thoughts and behaviors related to causing harm [11].

3. Protective Factors

3.1. Teacher-Student Relationships

In general, protective characteristics included relationships with teachers and classmates, and self-reported GPA. Students who have better relationships with their teachers tend to report lower rates of bullying, lower engagement in bullying, and fewer observations of bullying situations. Protective effects of classmate relationships and academic performance matter mainly for victims and witnesses of bullying [10].

Social support from teachers is crucial for students' psychological and school adjustment. Students are less likely to exhibit behavioral issues, such as aggression, in school, when they perceive their teachers as supportive and engaged. Similar to how supportive teacher-student relationships provide a protective buffer against bullying's negative impacts. Chinese students' social and cognitive behaviors have been proven to benefit from their teachers' warmth and encouragement, which also inhibits aggressive behaviors in the classroom [3]. Positive home-school connections can also reduce the incidence of bullying [3].

3.2. Collective Culture

Some studies have also shown that the traditional collectivism in Chinese schools is also a protective factor against bullying victimization. Within Chinese culture, there exists a strong emphasis on collectivism, which calls for students to prioritize collective well-being over individual needs. This cultural framework underscores the significance of students' sense of belonging and connection with their peer groups or the school community. These factors serve as vital social resources that offer protection against the negative impacts of being victimized by bullying [12]. Furthermore, studies indicate that societies that prioritize collectivist values, particularly those rooted in Confucian principles, tend to experience lower levels of aggression compared to societies that prioritize individualism.

4. Summary

The main objective of this paper was to review risk factors and protective factors that are associated with school bullying and bullying victimization in China. Several common themes have emerged from the studies this paper examined, including childhood maltreatment, mental health issues, gender, and school climate as risk factors. Also, teacher-student relationships, the collective culture in China, and academic performance are protective factors against school bullying. The insights gained from this review have significant implications for schools approaching bullying culture through school intervention and other forms of interventions. It also helps schools in providing protection for students' mental and physical health by preventing involvement in bullying.

It is important to acknowledge certain limitations in this review, such as the lack of studies on school bullying on a national scale in China. Since researchers tend to focus on certain cities with high levels of development, there is not enough data on school bullying in rural areas in China. In addition, cross-sectional studies cannot prove causality between associated factors and school bullying. Future research should consider developing more comprehensive studies with samples of students from both rural and urban areas in China. Studies are also needed to delve deeper into the unaddressed aspects of causality between risk factors, protective factors, and school bullying. This review has highlighted the enduring importance of eliminating school bullying and protecting the physical and mental well-being of Chinese youth.

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