

School Bullying Experienced by Chinese Migrant Children in Urban Schools and Its Intervention Strategies

Jingya Wang¹

¹ University of the Arts London, United Kingdom

Correspondence: Jingya Wang, University of the Arts London, United Kingdom.

doi:10.56397/AS.2024.04.07

Abstract

China's migrant children face major challenges in moving from rural areas to cities, of which the most important concern is discrimination and bullying. This article discusses the problem of school bullying encountered by migrant children and emphasizes the negative impact of this phenomenon on their body and mind. This article also applies the principle of design justice, and proposes self-protection measures and community-based intervention strategies for migrant children to reduce the occurrence of bullying and create a safer and more inclusive environment.

Keywords: migrant children, school bullying, discrimination, justice by design, intervention strategies

1. Introduction

In 2022, the total number of migrant workers in China is as high as 295 million, accounting for more than 30% of China's total working population. Migrant workers have been the engine of China's rapid economic growth over the past three decades, but their presence also reveals the discrimination and marginalization that exists in Chinese society. In China, migrant children are mainly children aged 0-17 years old who follow their migrant parents to migrate from rural to urban areas. The number of migrant children is huge. As of 2020, children affected by population mobility in China account for 46.4 percent of China's total child population. However, discrimination in urban schools is widespread. Much of this discrimination stems from differences in the economic and social status of parents, cultural differences, and the lack of acceptance of foreign cultures among urban children. This discrimination often evolves into bullying of migrant children, which has serious physical and psychological effects on them. The aim of this essay is to provide migrant children with self-protection measures by analyzing their current situation of bullying, as well as to provide intervention strategies for the community from the perspective of the principle of justice by design. The aim is to reduce the occurrence of such bullying behavior and to create a safer and more inclusive environment for migrant children to grow up in.

2. Literature Review

Migrant children in China are children aged 0-17 years old who migrate from rural to urban areas following their migrant parents, and in this essay they are mainly school-age children. In 2014, the State Council issued the Opinions on Further Promoting the Reform of the Household Registration System, which basically liberalized the settlement policy in some small and medium-sized cities. Although the reform of China's household registration system has provided migrant children with the opportunity to receive an education in the city, migrant children and parents face more than just institutional problems — whether migrant children can be treated equally in urban schools and have a healthy environment in which to grow up remains a prominent issue. School bullying is not only limited to physical harm, but also includes verbal insults, social exclusion, cyberbullying and other forms, all of which have a serious impact on the mental health and academic growth of migrant children (Wang, Lannotti & Luk, 2012). Looking around the world, bullying in schools has always

existed. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2017), “School bullying affects a large proportion of children and adolescents around the world. In terms of numbers, an estimated 246 million children and adolescents experience some form of school bullying each year.” A study also suggests that bullying in schools disproportionately affects immigrants, the poor, and culturally diverse groups (Xu, Macrynika, Waseem & Miranda, 2020). This is particularly evident among migrant children in China, who are at high risk of school bullying due to economic, cultural, and linguistic differences. In many Western countries, governments have proposed numerous measures to address bullying in schools. The British government requires all public schools to have a behavioral policy that includes measures to prevent all forms of bullying among students. All teachers, students and parents must comply with anti-discrimination laws. However, in China the problem of bullying among migrant children has not yet received sufficient attention from society. Tan (2010) conducted a survey of migrant children in two cities and found that about 21 percent of migrant children had experienced bullying. This percentage reveals a disturbing fact: the status quo of migrant children’s life in urban schools still faces great challenges. This situation raises the risk of psychological problems among migrant children, and a study by *Acta Psychologica Sinica* shows that perceptions of discrimination have a significant negative impact on the socio-cultural adaptation of migrant children, which makes it increasingly difficult for migrant children to integrate into urban environments when bullying behaviors, such as discrimination (Fan, Fang, Liu, Lin & Yuan, 2012). A study on the psychological resilience of migrant children shows that migrant children have lower levels of psychological resilience than local children who live stable lives (Liu, H., Liu, L & Jin, 2020). This also suggests that migrant children may face greater psychological stress and insecurity after being bullied in urban schools. Existing research focuses on the psychological impact of bullying on migrant children, and there is a lack of research on the intervention behaviors of the community when such bullying occurs. This essay is aimed at examining the ways in which the community can help migrant children who have been bullied, and how migrant children can help themselves when they have been bullied.

3. Definition and Assessment of Bullying in Schools

Bullying in schools has been an issue of widespread concern worldwide. This concern stems from the magnitude of the impact it has on young people, and when it does occur, it can have a serious impact on their mental health and development. A research from Gini and Espelage (2014) has shown that bullying can lead to serious psychological consequences, highlighting the strong correlation between bullying and psychological distress in students. Many scholars and organizations have different definitions of bullying in schools: the earliest definition was proposed by Olweus (1994), “When a student is repeatedly exposed to the negative behavior of one or more students, and over time, he or she is being bullied.” Thus, bullying can be direct or through other forms. In the book *School Bullying: Insights and Perspectives*, the authors argue that school bullying can take many forms: direct physical aggression, verbal abuse and taunting, discrimination regarding race or disability, or excluding someone from a social group. Thus, we can learn that school bullying is not just about physical behavioral violence, but is often covert and difficult to detect, which complicates the solution to intervene in bullying behavior. According to Modecki et al, students may fail to recognize certain behaviors as bullying, especially when it involves social exclusion or cyberbullying, which are less direct than physical aggression (Modecki, Minchin, Harbaugh, Guerra & Runions, 2014). This difference in recognition may prevent school bullying from being effectively intervened. So when students are subjected to some verbal bullying, they often reflect on whether they are not liked. They also usually do not tell their teachers about the experience because they believe that real physical violence is not occurring and that the teacher will not take effective action (Unnever & Cornell, 2004).

4. Causes and Effects of Bullying in Schools of Migrant Children

There have always been cases of migrant children being bullied in urban schools in China. Some Chinese scholars have found in interviews (Zhang, Qu & Zou, 2003) that discrimination against migrant children in cities is widespread, especially in the process of peer interaction: “They sometimes look down on us, give us blank stares, and don’t play with us.” Therefore, bullying suffered by migrant children in urban schools is not only limited to physical violence, but also includes psychological pressure and social exclusion, among other negative effects. The impact of school bullying on the character development and later life of the victims is extremely bad. Although certain acts of school bullying may not seem as brutal and horrible as physical violence on the surface, it is a regular feature that causes serious physical and psychological trauma to students. In terms of the characteristics of the population of students who are subjected to bullying in schools, family characteristics are particularly prominent. According to People’s Daily statistics (2021), the higher the parents’ education and the better the family’s economic conditions, the lower the probability of their children being bullied. Although the parents of migrant children serve as the main labor force in Chinese society, most of them are engaged in low-income manual labor. This also suggests that the economic and social status of parents influences the role that children play in school bullying. In addition, cultural differences also contribute to the bullying of migrant children in urban schools. Migrant children move between different regions, which may result in different

accents, living habits, etc. from urban children, and thus become targets of bullying and ostracism by their classmates. A survey in Beijing (Lei, 2004) showed that 33.7 percent of migrant children said they were not accepted by locals and 40 per cent claimed they were discriminated against. The survey also indicated that there are “us” and “them” attitudes among migrant children. City dwellers are often perceived as wealthier, better dressed, more knowledgeable and better speakers of Mandarin than the migrant population. However, migrant children are also seen as disrespectful, impolite and lazy. A survey in Guangdong found that 37 per cent of migrant children believed that urban children looked down on them. Thus, the unstable family background of migrant children and their frequently migrating lifestyles exacerbate this bullying phenomenon. Parents of migrant children may not be able to give their children sufficient attention and support due to their busy schedules and lack of sufficient time and social resources. This makes migrant children feel lost when they are bullied and do not know who to turn to for help.

5. Application of Design Justice Principles in School Bullying Intervention and Multiple Efforts

The Design justice principles can provide theoretical support to help mobile children who are victims of school bullying to develop more inclusive and effective self-protection strategies and interventions. The Design Justice Principles emphasize that design should be more sensitive to the needs and interests of marginalized groups and use collaborative practice to face challenges. Firstly, it is crucial to raise the awareness of migrant children of self-protection in the face of bullying in schools. This includes helping migrant children recognize and assess what bullying is and how to respond effectively and seek help when they experience it. For example, by modeling bullying in schools, children can learn how to adopt positive communication styles and seek effective self-protection measures in the event of bullying (Olweus, 1993). Secondly, multi-stakeholder support is also important. Cummins (2001) stated that multicultural education has a significant impact on reducing discrimination and bullying due to cultural differences. Therefore, education departments and schools should develop anti-bullying education programs that are inclusive of students from different cultural backgrounds. This means that educational content and activities should take into account the particular background and needs of migrant children, for example by organizing lessons on multicultural understanding and respect, as well as corresponding guidance to help migrant children adapt to the local language and culture. In addition, strengthening community and family support is equally important for migrant children to improve their ability to protect themselves. The principles of justice by design emphasize community participation (Costanza-Chock, 2020), and by strengthening the connections and interactions of migrant children and their families with the local community, it can provide children with a greater sense of security and belonging while living in the city. Community-based organisations (CBOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can set up structures dedicated to providing legal aid and mental health support to migrant children. Finally, in order to apply the design justice principles more effectively, it is important to invite migrant children to participate in the program design of anti-bullying strategies (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013). As direct experiencers and victims of bullying, their voices and perspectives contribute to the development of interventions that are more responsive to their needs.

6. Conclusion

This article explores the current state of bullying faced by migrant children and highlights the complexity of the challenges they face. What is clear is that bullying reveals more than just the socialization challenges faced by migrant children; it illustrates attitudes to economic and cultural differences that are rooted in society. The principles of justice by design discussed in this paper provide a theoretical framework for the development of interventions based on equity, participation, and inclusiveness, and advocate for a more inclusive and understanding approach to addressing bullying in schools by focusing on the needs and voices of children on the move. Going forward, addressing the problem of school bullying faced by children on the move will continue to require concerted efforts from all sectors of the community. This includes implementing comprehensive education reforms to create an environment of respect and acceptance; actively promoting legislation so that incidents of bullying in schools are no longer in the gray area of the law; and strengthening the community support system to provide these children and their families with the resources and help they need, and to ensure that policies at the national and local levels reflect a commitment to social justice and equity. More than that, further research is needed by all sectors of society to better understand the experiences of migrant children and to monitor the effectiveness of interventions in a timely manner. As China continues to develop, the well-being of vulnerable groups, including migrant children, should be prioritized, and ensuring that these children are able to grow up in an environment where their rights and dignity are respected is not only a moral obligation, but also a critical step towards building a more equitable and harmonious society.

References

China labour bulletin, (2023). Migrant workers and their children. Available at: <https://clb.org.hk/en/content/migrant-workers-and-their-children> (Accessed: 3 March 2024).

- Costanza-Chock, S., (2020). *Design justice: Community-led practices to build the worlds we need*. The MIT Press. Available at: https://library.oapen.org/viewer/web/viewer.html?file=/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/43542/external_content.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
- Cummins, J., (2001). *Bilingual children's mother tongue: Why is it important for education*. University of Toronto. Available at: <http://www.iteachilearn.com/cummins/mother.htm>
- Fan, X., Fang, X., Liu, Y., Lin, X. and Yuan, X., (2012). The effect of social support and social identity on the relationship between perceived discrimination and socio-cultural adjustment among Chinese migrant children. *Acta Psychologica Sinica*, 44(5), p. 647. Available at: 10.3724/SP.J.1041.2012.00647
- Gini, G. and Espelage, D.L., (2014). Peer victimization, cyberbullying, and suicide risk in children and adolescents. *Jama*, 312(5), pp. 545-546.
- Gov.UK, (n.d.). Bullying at school. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/bullying-at-school> (Accessed: 4 March 2024).
- Lei, Y., (2004). The world through the eyes of urban villagers. An investigative study into the social cognition of migrant children in the cities. *Educational Science Research*.
- Liu, H., Liu, L. and Jin, X., (2020). The impact of parental remote migration and parent-child relation types on the psychological resilience of rural left-behind children in China. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(15), p. 5388.
- Modecki, K.L. Minchin, J., Harbaugh, A.G., Guerra, N.G. and Runions, K.C., (2014). Bullying prevalence across contexts: A meta-analysis measuring cyber and traditional bullying. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 55(5), pp. 602-611.
- Olweus, D., (1993). *Bullying at school: What we know and what we can do*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
- Olweus, D., (1994). Bullying at school: Basic facts and effects of a school based intervention program. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 35(7), pp. 1171-1190.
- People's Daily*, (2021). The incidence of campus bullying is 32.4%. How to solve the dilemma of campus bullying? 2 November.
- Sharp, S., Smith, P.K. and Smith, P., (2002). *School bullying: Insights and perspectives*. Routledge.
- Simonsen, J. and Robertson, T., (2013). *Routledge international handbook of participatory design*. New York: Routledge. Available at: <https://api.taylorfrancis.com/content/books/mono/download?identifierName=doi&identifierValue=10.4324/9780203108543&type=googlepdf>
- Tan, Q., (2010). School bullying and school adjustment among urban migrant children in China. *Theory Pract Contemp Edu*, 2, pp. 94-96.
- The State Council the People's Republic of China, (2014). State Council on further advancement, the idea of reforming the household registration system (25). Available at: https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2014-07/30/content_8944.htm (Accessed: 3 March 2024).
- Unesco, (2017). *School Violence and Bulling: Global Status Report*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Accessed: 3 March 2024).
- Unnever, J.D. and Cornell, D.G., (2004). Middle school victims of bullying: Who reports being bullied?. *Aggressive Behavior: Official Journal of the International Society for Research on Aggression*, 30(5), pp. 373-388.
- Wang, J., Iannotti, R.J. and Luk, J.W., (2012). Patterns of adolescent bullying behaviors: Physical, verbal, exclusion, rumor, and cyber. *Journal of school psychology*, 50(4), pp. 521-534.
- Xu, M., Macrynika, N., Waseem, M. and Miranda, R., (2020). Racial and ethnic differences in bullying: Review and implications for intervention. *Aggression and violent behavior*, 50, p. 101340.
- Yuan, X., Fang, X., Liu, Y., Hou, S. and Lin, X., (2013). Development of urban adaptation and social identity of migrant children in China: A longitudinal study. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 37(3), pp. 354-365. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0147176712001186>
- Zhang, Q., Qu, Z. and Zou, H., (2003). A survey on the development of migrant children — An interview report on four cities of Beijing, Shenzhen, Shaoxing and Xianyang. *Youth studies*, (9), pp. 11-17.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).