

What Are the Children from Different Social-Economic Backgrounds' Experiences of School Bullying in China?

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Abstract

This essay is a proposal for a qualitative research. The research aimed to explore the experiences of school bullying among children from different socioeconomic backgrounds in China. Using semi-structured interviews, a diverse sample of children aged 10-15 was purposively selected across urban and rural areas. Thematic analysis revealed recurring patterns and themes within the data, highlighting the complexities of bullying within various social-economic contexts. It emphasizes the need for targeted interventions that consider the specific challenges faced by children from diverse socioeconomic contexts. By understanding the nuances of bullying within different social-economic backgrounds, policymakers and educators can develop comprehensive anti-bullying policies and programs that foster safe and inclusive educational environments for all children.

Keywords: educational research, school bullying

1. Rationale

According to the *2019 National Statistical Bulletin on Education Development* published by the Chinese Ministry of Education in 2020, there are currently 282 million students attending 530,100 schools in China. Keeping such a large number of students in a safe learning environment and avoiding violent incidents on campus is a crucial but challenging part of school management. According to research statistics, the public's biggest concern about schools is school bullying (Han et al., 2017). There is a high level of interest and engagement in research and investigation of school bullying by Chinese scholars. In China National Knowledge Infrastructure CNKI (China's largest academic online library), there are 2,079 articles related to school bullying or school violence, but the vast majority are descriptive introductions to Western theories and studies of a policy nature, lacking research practice (Zhang & Jiang, 2022).

Reflecting on the author's personal experience, I experienced a few weeks of school bullying when I moved from a public high school to a private high school. When I reported the problem, more attention was paid to the punishment of the perpetrators and the protection and comfort of me afterwards, both at the school and community levels. In other words, policy makers and enforcers have focused on reducing the negative effects of bullying in schools and have rarely thought about how to tackle the root of the problem. Through interviews, this research will investigate the experiences of school bullying among students from different economic backgrounds and examine one of the causes in essence.

2. Literature Review

According to Rigby's (2003) summary of the definition of school bullying, school bullying is considered a global concept and is categorised as physical bullying, verbal bullying and indirect bullying. It is an imbalance of power where bullying is not established if the two parties in conflict are equal or similar. School bullying is when the weaker party is threatened and victimised by a more powerful individual or group. Bullies are more

likely to commit crimes in adulthood, while those who are bullied can have long-term psychological problems such as severe depression and low self-esteem (Banks, 1997). Such a global problem has a negative impact in Chinese schools, and at the same time, the phenomenon of bullying in schools in China is differentiated by school policies and national conditions. According to Zhang et al. (2015), China's strong support for industrialisation and urbanisation in its economic planning and development has inevitably led to an influx of resources into urban rather than rural areas, resulting in a much higher level of social welfare, household income and educational resources in urban areas than in rural areas. Generally, the socio-economic backgrounds of students' families in rural areas of China are at a disadvantage compared to urban youth. The frequency of school bullying differs between students in rural and urban areas of China (Wang et al., 2022).

Wang et al. (2022) used a quantitative survey to collect information from a random sample of students in Jiangxi Province, China, by asking them to complete the SBS scale. The "Students Bullied at School" (SBS) scale is an internationally recognised and reliable assessment scale in which respondents rate the bullying behaviours covered by the scale, and the lower the calculated SBS score, the higher the level of bullying victimisation in schools. The results of the survey show that the average SBS score for the sample of rural Chinese students is 9.2, and that students in rural China experience bullying more frequently than in other regions. When collecting a sample of rural students, the team investigated the socio-economic background of these students. Combining the SBS scale with it, it was found that students from economically disadvantaged families were more likely to be bullied more frequently, the more remote the school location the higher the bullying rate, and the higher the student-teacher ratio the higher the bullying.

However, the role played by students from low socio-economic backgrounds in school bullying is controversial. According to Wang Haoran et al. (2021), rural children from low-income families are at higher risk of becoming bullies in school bullying because a large proportion of rural adolescents see bullying as a status symbol, while urban adolescents see it as rude, and differences in values lead to differences in the behavioural patterns of adolescents from urban and rural areas.

The socio-economic context as one of the risk factors contributing to bullying in schools can be seen to be complex and two-fold based on the above literature. It can both contribute to the presence of the bully and increase the risk of being bullied. Huang et al. (2013) argue that school bullying prevention and intervention programmes in China have been scarce. A qualitative study of the school bullying-related experiences of students from families with different economic backgrounds could lead to a conceptualisation of the correlation between socio-economic background and school bullying, which could facilitate the development of anti-bullying strategies.

3. Research Question

The aim of this study was to compare the school bullying experiences of students from families of different socio-economic backgrounds and to assess the relevance of socio-economic background in contributing to school bullying. The research question and sub-questions are:

- What are the children from different social-economic backgrounds' experiences of school bullying in China?
- What is the impact of socio-economic background on school bullying? Is there a positive or negative correlation?

4. Methodology

Interviews are the most widely used tool for qualitative researchers to gather information (Cassell, 2005). Nunkoosing (2005) states that "Interviews deal with thinking and talk that are later transformed into texts". According to Alsaawi (2014), interviews can be categorised into four types. The first type is the structured interview, which is a pre-planned interview that is able to limit the flexibility of elaboration. The second type is the unstructured interview, which is similar to a dialogue and possesses open flexibility. The third type is the semi-structured interview, which is a combination of the first and second type of interview, where questions are planned in advance but the interviewee is also given the opportunity to elaborate in depth by answering open questions. The fourth type is the focus group interview, which yields rich and in-depth data by allowing 6-12 interviewees to question and debate each other; it has no structural limitations. This study will use semi-structured interviews as the research methodology. In semi-structured interviews, a combination of open and closed questions will ensure that the interviewees do not deviate from the subject matter and will give the interviewees the opportunity to elaborate on the questions themselves. The depth of the interviewees' responses can enrich the data (Bryman, 2008). In addition, according to Abbe & Brandon (2014), semi-structured interviews build rapport and have a positive impact on the validity of the data by reducing the inaccuracy of responses. Small talk in semi-structured interviews attempts to help both parties to find common ground in order to build rapport, thus increasing validity.

The interviewees for this study will be the author's teachers in China. The author plans to interview two primary

schools teachers, two middle school teachers, two private high school teachers and two public high school teachers. One of the reasons for choosing Chinese teachers is that the research focuses on school bullying in China, so teachers in China are more familiar with the issues. Secondly, in the Chinese education system, students at different levels of school have different family economic backgrounds (Du, 2016) and therefore teachers from different schools needed to be interviewed. Specifically, there is no selection required to enter primary school, so the socio-economic background of families can vary significantly between students in Chinese primary schools. When students need to move from primary school to junior high school, good or bad grades and family background become criteria for screening students, and thus family differences decrease. The transition from middle school to high school is a further screening and testing process, while private and public schools divert students from different family backgrounds. Thus, higher school grades mean that family backgrounds of students vary less, and the influence of economic and social backgrounds can be assessed by comparing the frequency of school bullying in the data of responses of interviewees from different schools. The author has maintained good contact with many former elementary, middle and high school teachers and has access to both private and public high school teachers due to transfer experiences. I plan to take a random sample of teachers I know at each school, then contact the teachers via email or text message, fully explain and introduce my study in the message, ask for their permission and then conduct the data collection in the form of an online interview.

At the beginning of a semi-structured interview, the author designs two or three closed questions. The advantage of these questions is that they are easy to process and not time-consuming (Vinten, 1995), and they allow the interviewee to relax and facilitate the follow-up interview. The author designed the closed questions: (1) How many years have you been a teacher? (2) Do you have any experience of dealing with bullying in schools? At the end of the closed questions, there are open questions. The open questions designed by the author are: (1) In your experience, what aspects of the situation were unequal between the two parties, apart from the inequality of power? (2) Were there any obstacles encountered in dealing with it? From which side? (3) What do you think the triggers of school bullying include? What are the main ones? (4) How often does school bullying occur in your class or school? Seidman (1991) argues that firstly, the interviewer needs to focus on listening and understanding the substance in order to internalise it. Secondly, the interviewer needs to look for the inner voice of the interviewee, take what the interviewee says seriously and ask for an explanation of a word or a point in order to uncover a deeper level of meaning. Finally, the interviewer needs to be as sensitive as a teacher to the process, time, content and non-verbal cues. During the interview, the author will use audio recordings to ensure that the data is correct and authentic, and use note-taking to help maintain a high level of concentration.

However, the presence of interviewer effects can have a negative impact on the accuracy of interview results. Davis et al. (2010) argue that interviewer effects are differences in survey estimates due to differences in the data collected and are often attributed to measurement error due to interviewer characteristics, including bias and variable error. Therefore, for interviewers, establishing a rapport prior to the interview can increase the validity of the data collected (Abbe & Brandon, 2014), while remaining objective and unbiased.

5. Ethnical Consideration

To ensure the ethical nature of the study, the sample teachers will first have full information and consent. They will be fully informed of the objectives, direction, methodology and process of the study before starting the research and will be fully informed of their right to refuse to answer any of the questions and to withdraw from the survey at any time, without reason. In addition, due to the sensitive nature of the topic of school bullying, the interviewer is required to use objective, fair and polite language to prevent the interviewee from feeling uncomfortable and to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the research. Finally, the interviewer needs to treat each interviewee with respect throughout the research process.

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