

A Literature Review of the Reasons for School Bullying in China

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ABSTRACT

The problem of school bullying is serious in China. In China, the number of cases of school bullying was over 1000 in 2015. This paper reviews relevant research on the reasons for school bullying from different aspects, namely family, school, and social environment. Scholars have already found out the reasons for school bullying through theory analysis or sociological research. Some of them noticed the influence of family, especially unstable family structure and negative family environment. The impact of school was also considered, in terms of classroom size and teachers' attitudes. Some scholars discussed the social environment and laws in China, and some laws fail to prevent school bullying. This paper hopes to find the knowledge gaps in this field to further studies.

Keywords: *School bullying, Family relations, Education, Social environment, Law*

1. INTRODUCTION

A movie called *Better Days* has caught much attention from the public since its release on October 25, 2019. It penetrates school bullying presenting a whole picture of both bullies' and victims' family backgrounds, school environment, and pressure from social expectations. The harsh reality of school bullying shown in this movie aroused widespread discussion on this long-existed problem again. Many efforts have been put in to prevent and control school bullying. However, it just violently goes on and on.

School bullying refers to violent behaviours that take place in and around schools causing physical, mental, and property damage among students and teachers. This paper attempts to summarize and evaluate existing research from three aspects, namely family, school, and society. Most research noticed the influence of family, including unstable structure, negative environment, and improper parenting style. They also considered the impact of school, in terms of the context of classrooms, the counter-school culture, and teachers' attitudes. Finally, a large set of studies paid attention to how social environment, media, the Internet, and laws lead to school bullying.

2. FAMILY

2.1. Unstable family structure

Unstable family structure refers to incomplete marriage or kinship caused by widowhood, divorce, separation, and so on. Existing studies included quantitative analysis of different kinds of unstable family structures to obtain their adverse effects on school bullying. Many studies through quantitative or theoretical analysis, showed that the unstable family structure has a negative effect on the development of school bullying. It is noticeable that most quantitative studies [1-3] focus on rural areas and left-behind children while theoretical studies are mostly from an aspect of psychology. For example, Zhang and Xu used multiple regression to test the relationship between insecurity and inferiority of the left-behind college students and their aggressive behaviour [1]. Others were based on theoretical deduction of the impact of the unstable family structure. Huang used psychologist Shields' theory of family "warmth and control," and pointed out that in unstable families, parents and children feel less intimate so that children are more likely to experience emotional

instability and have antisocial tendencies and violent tendencies [4].

2.2. Negative family environment

A negative family environment refers to repetitive violence between parents or between parents and children. Su et al. [5] applied a theory called intergenerational transmission of family interaction. It means the way in which family members are interacting with each other. It often has a subtle and continuous effect on children's psychological and social behaviour. This article was heavily cited by many other scholars [6-8] and this intergenerational transmission theory sees a wide adoption in other studies afterwards. Huang also adopted the intergenerational transmission theory and further introduced the General Aggression Model [9] into her analysis. This model integrates the research on aggressive behaviour in psychology, communication science, and sociology assuming that the occurrence of aggressive behaviour is mainly based on the learning, activation, and imitation of the knowledge related to it. Similarly, Wei and Fan [10] pointed out that family is the earliest place for teenagers' socialization of individual morality. It can be said that the interaction between family members reflects students' behaviour in schools.

Many studies especially quantitative studies used Maccoby EE's classification of parenting styles [11]: authoritative (high warmth and high strictness), authoritarian (low warmth and high strictness), indulgent (high warmth and low strictness), and neglectful (low warmth and low strictness). Parenting style is a part of the family environment. It refers to the emotional attitudes and actions shown by parents in the process of raising their children and a generalization of the characteristics of parents' various parenting behaviours. This classification comprehensively concluded different parenting styles. Studies found that if families lack a consistent way of education or often impose harsh corporal punishment on their children then they will have a negative impact on children who will later become bullies or victims because parents' education of their children is not only oral but also practical. Children living in violent environments tend to bring such behaviour to schools and become the next bullies. Flannery and William's research showed that children who have been abused or neglected are 38% more likely to be arrested for violent crimes than those who have not been abused or neglected [12].

In addition, many studies also focused on intergenerational education, an important supplementary part of family education, which also has an impact on school bullying. For example, Xu and Pei [13] found that intergenerational education is more "breeding" than "teaching." This implies a shortcoming of intergenerational education. Kids are more likely to be spoiled and lack a certain degree of moral education.

However, Yang [7] noted that parents and grandparents tend to have roughly the same parenting style, meaning that the parenting style is also transmissive. Negative incentives that lie deeply accumulate generations and finally trigger bad behaviours like school bullying. Future research could address multigenerational transmission and how to reduce its adverse effects.

3. SCHOOL

3.1. Context of classrooms

Most of the previous research in the West adopted Olweus' theory. His book *Aggression in the Schools* prompted the study of school bullying in 1978 and became a fundamental thesis of the following studies [14,15]. However, scholars in China hardly used his theory but did a lot of China-based investigations in a quantitative approach. However, the previous studies in the West provide a reference function for the indigenisation of bullying cases in China. To some extent, the factors of school bullying in China are already being discussed in the West.

Previous research in the West showed that more bullying had been found in smaller classrooms [16]. A recent Chinese study on the schools in Guangzhou and Jiangsu Province also indicated that the more students in one class, the lower rate of bullying [17]. In classroom observations, bullying most frequently occurred when children were involved in solitary activities [18]. A considerable proportion of students lower the possibility to be alone. In China, most schools have extensive classes and fewer teachers. According to Atlas' point of view, larger classes would reduce the intersectional influences of aggressive behaviours among different students. Students have solid interactive groups which are independent of each other. However, this may also increase the proportion of bystanders in one class. The frequency of bullying perpetration is higher in classrooms where reinforcing the bullies' behaviours is common and defending the victimized classmates is rare, implying that bullying is socially rewarded [16]. Therefore, the size of classes, to some extent, has an impact on bullying behaviours.

Second, Ersilia thought that there is more bullying in highly hierarchical classrooms, where peer status, popularity, and power are centered upon a few individuals rather than evenly distributed [19]. Whether the students could be equally treated or not may influence the bullying behaviours. When students feel that they are manipulated by the school and lack the freedom to achieve self-decisions, they will create their own value and environment to anti-school [20]. Moreover, due to the highly stressful system of education in China, students are more likely to commit aggressive behaviours. They will create their own value and environment to counter school, the so-called anti-school culture [20].

3.2. Teachers

Apart from that, lots of schools lack channels for students to reflect on the actual situations about bullying, which makes it imperceptible. Therefore, raising teachers' awareness about bullying may be important to increase the frequency of teacher intervention in bullying interactions [18]. Moreover, when students start to perceive their teachers' attitudes towards bullying, and their bullying behaviours will be reduced.

Consequently, teachers' negligence may lead to the growth of bullying in schools. Last but not least, bullying is more likely to happen when aggressive children are under close supervision or are less interactive with the teachers [18]. The relationship between teachers and students determined how likely the bullying would happen and be controlled. Hu held the view that teachers' may lack the understandings of the severity of bullying and ignore the signs of pro-bullying behaviours [21].

4. SOCIETY

4.1. Social environment

Some teenagers are influenced by a negative social environment. Some negative norms and values in society such as consumerism and hedonism will influence teenagers. Some organizations near school really have a bad influence on teenagers. Teenagers will spend a lot of money in these organizations so they might need to rob other students and they learn consumerism in these organizations.

Zhan claimed that teenagers might choose to go to bars and spend a lot of money there. In these bars, teenagers can learn some bad behaviours like smoking, drinking wine, taking drugs, and solving questions by violence. They may also steal, rob, and blackmail their schoolmates to get more money to consume in these bars again. Some people in society also have indirect bad influences such as teaching teenagers to do illegal things or allowing teenagers to enter bars [22]. Han also argued that many places are invading teenager's life. Bars, pubs, nightclubs, bath centres, and video game centres are just near schools which can easily have negative effects on teenagers [23].

However, Zhan and Han did not have clear data about the real situation of these places. For example, they did not collect information about the number of these organizations and how many students with bullying behaviours have gone to these organizations. They also failed to quantify their opinions and prove them.

According to Feeley, in a nice environment with no factors to force a man to commit a crime, he will never do criminal things. Some people in society who had already graduated will take part in school bullying. In China, the

percentage of people without work who take part in school bullying cases reaches 11.95% [24].

4.2. Influence of media and the Internet

Violent information on the Internet and media will influence teenagers' behaviour. Media may further strengthen teenagers' violent behaviour.

Nowadays, most teenagers can have access to the Internet easily. However, many things on the Internet such as violence, sexual behaviours, and consumerism have a bad influence on teenagers. Some students will be interested in these contents and imitate. Wang Yuting argued that in this way, they can get higher status in peer groups by bullying others so teenagers may do the school bullying and spread the message on the Internet [25]. Zhan argued that some teenagers also choose to do school bullying in order to take videos about school bullying and get more fans by these videos on the Internet [22]. The Internet can spread the information of news quickly, and people can find all kinds of information on the Internet, so it will be easier for teenagers to be exposed to some violent information.

A common explanation of how violent behaviours are caused by media is imitation. Teenagers may imitate what they see so that they may have violent behaviour due to violent media. Bandura et al. are scholars who focused on social learning studies. They did a Bobo doll experiment. Groups of children who saw adults' violent behaviour will subsequently behave violently. This experiment proved that vulnerable and immature teenagers and children will imitate the behaviour they see on media [26].

According to the American Psychological Association, reading violent content and watching violent videos will cause the propensity for violence and the lack of compassion and Liang Likun agrees with it. For example, three students in New Bedford High School in Massachusetts imitated the school shooting after watching the videos about the school shooting in Columbine High School [27].

Similarly, some scholars noticed the cultural effects model indicating that if violence is shown as a normal or acceptable way to settle disputes by media, teenagers will absorb this culture and Gerbner claimed that this might make teenagers develop a "violent mindset" that if teenagers read too much violent information, they are desensitized to violence. This will also lead to violent real-world behaviour as they accept violence as a "way of life" [28].

This kind of violent culture will have a deeper influence on teenagers in society. The amount of violent information such as in violent games, violent videos, and violent films will be larger in the market, so there will be more teenage heavy consumers of violent games which is

related to the social environment in 4.1. Jiang Xianhua also claimed that publicity of violent culture is very serious now through all kinds of ways such as films, videos, games, and novels. The violent culture will undermine teenagers to make them form the propensity for violence [29].

Violent media have a larger effect on teenagers than adults not only because teenagers are more vulnerable but also because teenagers are still in the process of early socialisation. Huesmann and Miller claimed that if teenagers use violence to solve problems, it is more likely for them to behave violently, especially when they are stressed or scared [30].

Additionally, the concept of deviance amplification developed by Wilkins demonstrates how media further increase violent behaviour. If there is primary deviance such as school bullying is identified by the media, the deviant teenagers will receive isolation and alienation because they are labelled by the media. This will cause more social reactions about laws and some formal institutions. For example, if government notices the situation, they may set stricter laws. Then, the toleration of deviance is decreased so the level of deviance will increase. More social reactions are applied and the level of deviance increases again. This is called a deviancy amplification spiral [31].

However, some scholars have very different perspectives. Hewitt criticized that some violence caused by media is not accurate. For example, Belson analysed the relationship between violence and the time that boys are exposed to television. Belson concluded that boys who had seen a lot of TVs committed 49% of violent acts than boys with low exposure to TV. However, there is a significant limitation in Belson's research. He measured the total time that boy used to watch TV instead of the time boy watched violent TV programs or violent films. He failed to analyse the impact of TV on the violent behaviours of teenage boys [32].

Another evidence against media causing violence is some scholars simply understand the relationship between media and violence. Actually, the relationship between media and violence is complex and hard to measure. It cannot be proved that teenagers become violent because they watch violent videos and play violent games. Teenagers may become less violent due to the influence of media and the Internet. Teenagers can release their pressure by playing violent games so they will be calmer in reality [33]. Cohen also suggested that moral panics will help build moral values because some violent cases reported by media will help people realize violence is not acceptable in society and sensitisation is built [34].

4.3. Laws

Most scholars who analyse the factors of laws argued that the laws in China are not clear about school bullying. They cited Ren's work in CUPL (the China University of Political Science and Law) [35]. Ren Haitao mentioned the basic concept and definition of school bullying and the relevant responsibility of laws.

A couple of researchers paid attention to the lack of relevant laws against school bullying in China. Shen argued that some laws allow teenagers to do school bullying because they are not strict enough for teenagers. The Criminal Law in China does not have specific laws for school bullying. It refers to the laws about minors: teenagers under fourteen are not responsible for any criminal liability. Teenagers between fourteen and sixteen are only responsible for eight kinds of crimes such as murder. Teenagers above fourteen and under eighteen shall be given a lighter or mitigated punishment. Shen also claimed that in some situations, teenagers will not be punished after doing school bullying. The policemen may just require parents to educate their children. However, the rules and laws in our country are not clear enough about in which situation that teenagers can be taken home by parents [24].

Li argued that *The Law on the Protection of Minors* in China is about protecting the rights of minors because they are vulnerable. However, it does not refer to how to punish and manage school bullying. The general laws in it are not able to be used for school bullying cases. *The Law of Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency* in China also does not have specific laws for school bullying. According to the laws, these contents only have indirect laws for juvenile delinquency, so the laws for school bullying are not clear [36]. Wang claimed that this represents a lack of support from laws when facing the cases of school bullying and the cost of juvenile delinquency is very low [37]. Therefore, in practice, it is hard to interrogate teenagers because of the Law on the Protection of Minors. Imagine an innocent teenager was interrogated, there might be psychological harm for this teenager. Therefore, it is also very hard to deal with criminal cases related to teenagers.

5. CONCLUSION

The research on school bullying has become theme-focused, issue-clarified, perspective-diverse. They generally highlighted the influence of family, school, and the society. Firstly, in terms of family, it includes the influence of unstable structure, negative environment, and improper parenting style on the development of school bullying. Secondly, as to school, the context of classrooms, the counter-school culture, and teachers' attitudes have certain impacts on bullying. Finally, social environment and laws also lead to school bullying.

However, there are still limitations: first, the quality of results. In the existing research, many studies remained at the surface of school bullying with a general conclusion. Second, there were few empirical studies. Most of the studies were reviews and theoretical deductions. Third, the study object is confined. Most studies focused on middle schools to high schools. Data collecting may be biased.

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