Analysis of Bystanders in School Bullying: Attitudes and Influencing Factors-- Based on a Questionnaire of 886 Students in Jiangsu Province

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Abstract: Research has shown that the interference of bystanders could effectively stop bullying in time. In light of a documented shortage of empirical research, this paper explores the attitudes of bystanders toward bullying through a questionnaire survey of 886 students, ranging from elementary school to senior high school. The results shed light on the factors that influence actions of students as bystanders in school bullying.

Keywords: School-bullying; Bystanders; Factors; Teachers

1. Background

Recently, school bullying has aroused widespread concern around the world. In 2017, Ministry of Education of China (MOE of PRC) officially defined it as "an incident that occurs among students inside or outside the campus, in which one group of students maliciously insult or bully others through physical or verbal means, causing physical harm, property damage or psychological trauma". School bullying, a group phenomenon, usually happens among students [1]. In this situation, students react differently and thus form various groups. Hawkins found that in school bullying incidents, bullies and victims account for merely 20%, while bystanders account for approximately 80% [2], yet bulk of current studies focus on the bullies and the bullied, and do not pay sufficient attention to bystanders.

1.1 Categories of Bystanders

Salmivalli [3] classified bystanders into four categories: reinforcers, who give positive feedback to bullying behaviors and strengthen them in supportive ways; assistants, who help the bullies insult others; outsiders, who maintain a neutral attitude and keep silent; and defenders, who help the bullied ones and actively resist or stop bullying actions.

When school bullying takes place, the protective behavior of bystanders plays a positive role. Even if there is only one defender, the fear and anxiety suffered by the victims is much less than that of no protection [4]. Although majority of bystanders have negative attitudes toward bullying, only 17% - 20% of them are willing to help the victims [5]. Both the bullies and the defenders seem to have a certain say among peers, but the defenders generally receive less support than that bullies receive from reinforcers and assistants [6].

1.2 Influencing Factors

a. Personality and Previous Experience

Compared with their peers, defenders often have higher self-esteem or empathy, and are proved to have higher standard of social self-efficacy [7]. Factors making them more willing to transform from negative bystanders to defenders are as follows: being female; being able to empathize with the bullied; being a friend of the bully; having a high sense of morality and believing that bullying others is immoral; having a high sense of belonging to the school community; and having been bullied in the past.

Factors making bystanders reluctant to help victims are as follows: being afraid of being bullied as well; having bullied others or been bullied before; disliking the bullied or think the bullied is at fault; being a friend of the bully. Also, those who do not believe that they have the responsibility to prevent bullying are more likely to play the negative roles [8].

b. Peer Support

Emotional support and behavioral expectations given by peers will greatly affect the decisions of bystanders [9]. Defenders are more likely to befriend students who are also willing to demonstrate protective behavior, vice versa. Surrounded by friends who are defenders, a neutral bystander will be affected by their behaviors and take the initiative to protect the bullied. If a defender can obtain some support from peers, the probability of implementing protective actions will be greatly increased.

c. School Ethos

School ethos is mainly reflected in two aspects: teachers' attitude and cultural atmosphere. Teachers' attitudes include two categories [10]: supportive attitude, which mainly involves emotional support, behavioral assistance, information provision and praise; non-supportive attitude, which refers to unmet expectation and negative interaction [6]. Sabrina found that the lower self-efficacy teachers possess in dealing with bullying, the more likely students are to befriend the defenders [11].

Humanistic atmosphere has a significant influence on the incidence of bullying. A positive and humane school ethos is the premise for students to have a sense of belonging and security. The very groups affecting school atmosphere involve not only teachers and students, but also other school staff, such as drivers, doctors, academic administrators, cafeteria staff, etc., but the roles of such groups are often ignored.

2. Methods

2.1 Samples

The time span of the survey is from June 2022 to August 2022. A total of 7 primary and middle schools in 3 cities in Jiangsu Province are selected. Students from each school are randomly selected from one to two classes to complete the questionnaires online. In order to ensure the rationality, all the questionnaires are anonymous. 892 questionnaires are collected, of which 886 are valid, and the effective rate is approximately 99.3%.

The research samples are students from Grade 4 to Grade 6 (n=396; 44.7%) in primary schools and students in each grade of junior high schools (n=69; 7.79%) and senior high schools (n=421; 47.5%). Participants include 460 female students (51.9%) and 426 male students (48.1%).

2.2 Questionnaire

Apart from investigating the current situation of school bullying, the questionnaire mainly sets questions from four dimensions: roles of bystanders, driving forces to become defenders, teacher intervention and school atmosphere.

In the dimension of "roles of bystanders", there are two questions: Have you ever witnessed a classmate being bullied by others? How do you react when you see other students being bullied?

Three questions are set in the dimension of "driving forces to become defenders": What will prompt you to protect the bullied when school bullying taking place? What will prevent you from helping the victims? Which methods do you prefer to use to help the bullied ones?

In terms of "teacher intervention", there are three questions to be answered: How satisfied are you with teachers handling school bullying? What makes you reluctant to seek help from teachers when you witness school bullying? How would you describe your relationship with teachers?

Two questions are set in the dimension of "school atmosphere": Who are you more willing to seek help from when you are bullied? How do your school administrators deal with bullying?

2.3 Data and Discussion

a. Current Situation of School Bullying

The majority of students (75.4%) said that they "rarely witness bullying", 15.1% of students "occasionally witness school bullying", and only a small number of students (9.48%) often witness bullying. Among all kinds of school bullying behaviors, verbal bullying is the most frequent (61.51%) one, followed by physical attack and body charge (36.23%), and social isolation (34.08%). The most serious behaviors (threat and intimidation) accounts for the least (8.24%), which may due to the global growing concern of school bullying, thus more educational administrators attach importance to school security and take corresponding measures.

When students encounter a bullying incident, 68.17% of them will "immediately resist it", 26.52% choose to "be neutral outsiders", and very few students will assistant the bullies (2.14%) or even join them (3.16%). The results are better than expectation—this may because of the location of schools are in economically developed areas of mainland, so that school management and students competency are usually at higher levels.

The most vulnerable students are "silent, timid and cowardly (63.21%)", followed by students who have "physical defects or ugly appearance (39.73%)" and "poor academic performance (31.6%)". Students with rough personality and poor relationship with

others are more likely to be bullied (28.89%). This indicates that personality is strongly associated with the possibility of being bullied.

Students who frequently bully others often "have poor family education (66.48%)" or "have bad habits and contact with delinquents (39.95%)", which proves that morality is the decisive factor. At the same time, students "with good family background (27.2%)" or "possess strong physique (25.73%)" are more likely to bully others. Students who act as leaders among peers (16.14%) tend to dominate their peers' social tendency towards individuals. Students with good relationships with teachers often have a sense of self-moral restraint and rarely bully others (7.67%). Surprisingly, study also found that a proportion of students who have been bullied before (15.8%) may switch to bullying roles after that.

b. Influencing Factors of Bystander's Behavior

According to results of the question "what motivates you the most to help the bullied ones", family education and personal beliefs are vital factors (44.4%), followed by "schools encourage students to resist bullying (23.3%)". Effect of school on students varies from grades to grades. Data shows that there is a positive correlation between grade and school intervention.

For students below grade 9, "friendship with the bullied ones" is more effective than school encouragement that drives them to become defenders. What is not so obvious is "personal experience and empathy". The number of students who "have similar experience and are willing to help others" decreases with the growth of age—when students getting mature, their tempers become stable, therefore, they are more inclined to be guided by rational factors (such as school propaganda) rather than emotional ones.

For the question "what makes you reluctant to become defenders", 66.8% of students choose "they are not sure whether the bullying could be effectively stopped", fearing that their intervention may cause negative effects. Other factors, such as "parent's warning", "fear of bullies", "peer relationship" and "school attitude" are not so significant, indicating that more students will be willing to become defenders if they are given appropriate guidance and provided with effective measures to stop bullying.

The questionnaire also investigated "ways to help the bullied": 89.3% of the students prefer to "ask teachers for help"; 10.7% of them directly intervene bullying. As for "satisfaction with teacher intervention in dealing with school bullying", 63.88% are "satisfied", 30.25% think it is "neither better or worse", and 5.87% of the students chose "dissatisfied".

As to the question of "why you are reluctant to ask your teachers for help", 28.67% of the students said "their teachers do not pay much attention to bullying "; 22.8% said that "their teachers are too lenient in punishing the bullies"; 20.77% of the students said they "once asked the teacher for help, but did not get sufficient feedback". 19.41% think that "their teachers are too strict, and they don't want to be hated by bullies", and 8.35% of students rarely ask teachers for help because "their relationships with teachers are not very good". Accordingly, the way teachers handling school bullying will greatly affect students' attitudes and behaviors.

c. Effect of teacher-student relationship and school management on the roles of bystanders

SPSS 21 was used to analyze the data. We classified the four roles of bystanders into two categories based on their actions: positive role (defender) and passive roles (outsider, assistant and reinforcer). Then we set the dependent variable "playing a positive role". "Teacher-student relationship" was set as an independent variable and Chi-square test of independence was used for analysis (table 1).

In table 1, X2=66.460, df=3, p=0.000, rejecting the null hypothesis, it can be seen that "teacher-student relationship" is significantly associated with "being defenders". Combined with the contingency table of variables, we found that the closer relationships with the teachers, the more likely students are to become a defender when witnessing bullying, vise versa.

Table 1 Chi-square Test of Independence（n=886）

			Roles of bystanders		total	X^2	df	p
			defender	Non-defender				
Teacher-student relationship	1. Trust the teachers and get on well with them	Observed value	202	41	243			
		Expected value	165.7	77.3	243			
	2. Respect the teachers, but not close to them	Observed value	374	189	563			
		Expected value	383.8	179.2	563	66.460	3	0.000
	3. lack of communication, be indifferent	Observed value	19	34	53			
		Expected value	36.1	16.9	53			
	4. distrust or dislike the teachers	Observed value	9	18	27			
		Expected value	18.4	8.6	27			

We set "playing a positive role" as the dependent variable, "importance given by school to bullying" as the independent variable, and use Chi-square test of independence to analyze the data. In table 4, x2=95.023, df=2, p=0.000, rejecting the null hypothesis, it can be seen that "importance given by school to bullying" is significantly associated with "playing a positive role". According to the contingency table of variables, the more attention schools pay to bullying, the more likely students are to become defenders.

Table 2 Chi-square Test of Independence（n=886）

			Roles of bystanders		total	X^2	df	p
			defender	Non-defender				
Importance given by school	great	Observed value	524	162	686			
		Expected value	467.7	218.3	686			
	limited	Observed value	65	102	167	95.023	2	0.000
		Expected value	113.8	53.2	167			
	careless	Observed value	15	18	33			
		Expected value	22.5	10.5	23			

When witnessing school bullying, students tend to seek help from teachers (60.72%), parents (25.06%) and classmates (12.87%). Few students (1.35%) turn to other staff (school administrators, bus drivers, logistics, etc.). Although the majority of students said that those people are willing to offer help when bullying occurs, they have not played an adequate role in preventing bullying or creating a safe school atmosphere.

3. Conclusion

3.1 Decisive factor in determining student's role as bystander: personality and background

Family education, personality and competence determine students' choices, whether they are bullies, victims or bystanders, and there is no significant difference between male and female. Family education and moral values are the most effective elements in motivating students to become defenders, while other factors, such as school encouragement and peer support have little impact on it.

Befriending with students who are defenders, individual will show some altruistic behaviors and become more compassionate because of the conformity effect. However, results in this survey indicate that similar protective behavior among peers is a personal choice rather than imitation. This may be due to that in bullying scenarios, taking protective actions requires the weighing of gains and losses. Protecting others in bullying scenarios requires some strategic skills as well.

Most of the students do not know how to help the bullied when facing school bullying without any guidance. They are strong in will but weak in power. At present, access to knowledge related to school bullying is relatively limited and mainly relies on teacher's publicity or school activities. Therefore, families should cooperate with schools to improve the cognitive level of students and their anti-bullying ability.

3.2 Important factor in bullying prevention: teacher's role

As the group with frequent contact with students, teachers play the most effective role in stopping school bullying. Instruction given by teachers will greatly affect students' choices as bystanders. When students have a close relationship with teachers, they will be more confident to protect others, vice versa. When teachers fail to meet students' expectations or reacting negatively when coping with bullying, students will be less willing to prevent bullying.

Although currently teachers attach more importance to school bullying, only nearly 60% of students are satisfied with their teacher's effort, which shows that there is still much room for improvement. In addition, teachers' idiomatic expressions and punishment measures also affect bullying: students who are severely punished or ostracized by teachers are likely to be bullied by peers. Therefore, teachers should be careful about their deeds and management methods in daily teaching.

3.3 Other factor: school atmosphere

Students' willingness to stop bullying is positively correlated with school's emphasis on bullying. Since immersing in a friendly and anti-bullying atmosphere, defenders will receive more praise and recognition for their behaviors [9], and the higher moral

expectations given by teachers and other peers also encourage more students to help the bullied. To establish a safe and friendly atmosphere, schools should provide more training for teachers as well as other staff such as educational administrators, drivers and welfare officers.

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