

The Current Situation of Bullying in Chinese Elementary Schools

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Abstract: This paper randomly selected 998 first through sixth graders from 4 elementary schools of Nantong as the object and adopted the questionnaire method. Key findings were that 45.7% of pupils had been bullied over the past few months. The proportion of boys bullied was higher than that of girls and the proportion of higher grade pupils bullied was above that of middle and lower grade pupils; among them, the ratio of 5th grade pupils being bullied was the highest. The frequency of being bullied differs from grade to grade. In the past several months, the number of pupils bullied 2-3 times a term and 2-3 times per month increased as their grades rose while the number of pupils bullied once a week and several times a week had no significant grade difference. Most victims would tell their classroom teachers and then parents and friends about their sufferings. Compared with girls, boys played the principal roles that exerted bullying. Verbal bullying, rumors and physical bullying were the most prevalent forms for both girls and boys. The “hot spots” for bullying included the classroom (teachers are not in), hallways/stairwells and playgrounds.

Key words: elementary school; pupil; bullying; current situation

1.INTRODUCTION

Bradshaw et al. (2013a, 2013b) defined bullying as proactive aggression that repeatedly occurs and involves a power imbalance between the aggressor and the victim. The issue was first noticed by the Norway scholar, Olweus. As early as in the 1970s, he began to study the school bullying in Sweden, Norway and other Nordic countries. With patulous and deeper study, various kinds of bullying are found and the hazards of school bullying are also cognized gradually.

In recent years, an increasing number of bullying incidents have been reported by the media. In 2014 and 2015, Chinese media exposed 43 bullying incidents. Bullying occurs in both large cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, and less developed cities such as Guangxi and Yunnan; in both urban and rural areas. In view of this situation, Education Steering Committee of China’s State Council issued a special notice of curbing bullying on April 28, 2016, demanding that all elementary schools carry out more special rectification programs to address bullying problems.

Unlike the severity of bullying in middle schools and high schools, in particular the violence severity, bullying in elementary schools has a certain anonymity and because of pupils’ age features, bullying can easily be misjudged as a game or a joke. Virtually, these bullying behaviors, present in elementary schools, place children at risk for destructive, violent, and aggressive behavior as they mature (Bradshaw et al. 2013a, b). Therefore, understanding bullying in elementary schools (e.g., the locations, forms, and perceived effectiveness of prevention strategies) is crucial and knowing where and when bullying occurs is conducive to reducing bullying. (Vaillancourt et al. 2010).

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants

The general sample is composed of 998 (474 girls, 524 boys) first through sixth graders from A, B, C and D 4 elementary schools ($N_A=309$, $N_B=206$, $N_C=257$, $N_D=226$) in Nantong city, Jiangsu Province, China.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of pupils

	Girls		Boys		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Grade						
1	45	46.4	52	53.6	97	9.7
2	45	45.9	53	54.1	98	9.8
3	88	50.0	88	50.0	176	17.6
4	96	47.1	108	52.9	204	20.5
5	118	48.8	124	51.2	242	24.3
6	82	45.3	99	54.7	181	18.1
Total	474	47.5	524	52.5	998	100.0

2.2. Measure

The questionnaire was adapted by Bully/Victim Questionnaire developed by Olweus (1989). The questionnaire is composed of a variety of aspects of school bullying such as the subject exerting bullying, the frequency, the forms, the locus and pupils' reporting. Therefore, the detailed information about the prevalence and other aspects of bullying was included.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Prevalence of bullying

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of prevalence

	Not be bullied		Be bullied	
	N	%	N	%
Gender				
Girls (N=474)	272	57.4	202	42.6
Boys (N=524)	270	51.5	254	48.5
Grade				
1 (N=97)	76	78.4	21	21.6
2 (N=98)	59	60.2	39	39.8
3 (N=176)	101	57.4	75	42.6
4 (N=204)	102	50.0	102	50.0
5 (N=242)	114	47.1	128	52.9
6 (N=181)	90	49.7	91	50.3
Total (N=998)	542	54.3	456	45.7

Bullying is pervasive in Nantong elementary schools. 45.7% of pupils claimed that in the past several months they had been bullied. The proportion of boys bullied was higher than girls (48.5% V.S.42.6%). The percentage of higher grade pupils bullied (50.3%, 52.9%), was followed by middle grade (50.0%, 42.6%) and lower grade pupils (39.8%, 21.6%). The ratio of fifth graders bullied was the highest (50.3%).

3.2. Frequency of bullying

Table 3. Demographic characteristics of frequency

		2-3 times/term	2-3 times/month	Once/week	Several times/week
Gender	N				
	%				
Girls (N=474)		92	65	29	16
		19.4	13.7	6.1	3.4
Boys (N=524)		124	75	37	18
		23.7	14.3	7.1	3.4
Grade	N				
	%				
1 (N=97)		11	5	3	2
		11.3	5.2	3.1	2.1
2 (N=98)		16	14	5	4
		16.3	14.3	5.1	4.1
3 (N=176)		32	22	15	6
		18.2	12.5	8.5	3.4
4 (N=204)		49	28	16	9
		24.0	13.7	7.8	4.4
5 (N=242)		61	44	15	8
		25.2	18.2	6.2	3.3
6 (N=181)		47	27	12	5
		26.0	14.9	6.6	2.8
Total (N=998)	N	216	140	66	34
	%	21.6	14.0	6.6	3.4

Over the past few months, 21.6% of the pupils have been bullied 2-3 times a term, 14.0% have been bullied 2-3 times per month, 6.6% have been bullied once a week and 3.4% have been bullied several times a week. The higher the frequency of bullying was, the fewer the victims were. The number of pupils bullied 2-3 times a term increased as their grades rose. The number of pupils bullied 2-3 times had the same trend. The only difference was that bullied pupils of 5th grade were more than those of 6th grade. The percentage of pupils bullied once a week and several times a week was relatively stable, at 6% and 3% level, plus or minus.

3.3. Reporting after being bullied

Table 4. Demographic characteristics of reporting object

		Not told	Told					
			Classroom teacher	Other teachers	Parents/ elders	Brothers/ sisters	Friends	Somebody else
Gender	N							
	%							
Girls (N=474)		64	212	12	126	25	82	15
		13.5	44.7	2.5	26.6	5.3	17.3	3.2
Boys (N=524)		98	241	15	135	20	57	24
		18.7	46.0	2.9	25.8	3.8	10.9	4.6
Grade	N							
	%							
1 (N=97)		7	60	5	16	1	7	3
		7.2	61.9	5.2	16.5	1.0	7.2	3.1
2 (N=98)		12	37	1	38	1	10	1
		12.2	37.8	1.0	38.8	1.0	10.2	1.0
3 (N=176)		24	74	4	65	8	25	8
		13.6	42.0	2.3	36.9	4.6	14.2	4.6
4 (N=204)		35	118	3	45	11	26	3
		17.2	57.8	1.5	22.1	5.4	12.8	1.5
5 (N=242)		44	91	8	59	19	48	12
		18.2	37.6	3.3	24.4	7.9	19.8	5.0
6 (N=181)		40	73	6	38	5	23	12
		22.1	40.3	3.3	21.0	2.8	12.7	6.6
Total (N=998)	N	162	453	27	261	45	139	39
	%	16.2	45.4	2.7	26.2	4.5	13.9	3.9

Note: Total may be equal to 998 since pupils may tell several individuals.

When subjected to bullying, 45.4% of the pupils would tell their classroom teachers, which showed the pupils' full confidence in them. 26.2% of pupils tended to inform their parents and elders. 13.9% confided to their friends, 4.5% told their brothers and sisters, 2.7% may tell other teachers and the rest 3.9% chose to tell other people. Meanwhile, 16.2 percent of pupils would prefer to forbear by themselves. Compared with girls, boys were more willing to grin and bear it (13.5% V.S.18.7%). With grade rising, the ratio of pupils who silently endure was increasing, in sixth grade, at the highest, 22.1%.

3.4. Subjects exerting bullying

Table 5. Demographic characteristics of subjects

	Bullied by girls		Bullied by boys	
	N	%	N	%
Gender				
Girls (N=474)	133	28.1	112	23.6
Boys (N=524)	54	10.3	220	42.0
Grade				
1 (N=97)	11	11.3	12	12.4
2 (N=98)	11	11.2	21	21.4
3 (N=176)	36	20.5	58	33.0
4 (N=204)	32	15.7	67	32.8
5 (N=242)	54	22.3	96	39.7
6 (N=181)	43	23.8	78	43.1
Total (N=998)	187	18.7	332	34.0

Note: Total may not be equal to 456 since bullying may occurred in more than one category, the same below.

Female perpetrators of bullying incidents accounted for 18.7% and male offenders accounted for 34.0%. For female victims, the proportion of female perpetrators was higher than male (28.1% V.S. 23.6%); for male victims, the proportion of male perpetrators was higher than female (42.0% V.S. 10.3%). Visibly, bullying was more common among the same gender. Overall, the number of boys as well as girls bullied increased as their grades rose; with higher grade pupils, boys' bullying behavior occurred more frequently than girls'. Among them, sixth grade boys (43.1%) had the most serious bullying tendency.

3.5. Forms of bullying

Common forms of bullying are as follows: (1) Physical bullying (be kicked, hit, pinched and shoved around); (2) Verbal bullying (be called nicknames or mocked maliciously); (3) Exclusion (be ignored or excluded from the group purposely); (4) Rumors (spread mendacious words, resulting in others' misunderstanding or disgust); (5) Belongings damage (money, stationery and other things are stolen or damaged); (6) Threat (be forced to do something by dreadful words); (7) Cyber bullying (mean messages and calls by cell phones or blogs over the Internet) etc.

Table 6. Demographic characteristics of forms

	N	Physical	Verbal	Exclusion	Rumors	Belongings	Threat	Cyber
Gender								
	%							
Girls (N=474)		64	192	112	170	113	92	50
		15.6	40.5	23.6	35.9	23.8	19.4	10.5
Boys (N=524)		218	206	146	153	160	172	57
		39.7	39.3	27.9	29.2	30.5	32.8	10.9
Grade								
	%							
1 (N=97)		20	21	21	19	10	23	10

	20.6	21.6	21.6	19.6	10.3	23.7	10.3
2 (N=98)	36	37	30	29	35	28	9
	36.7	37.8	30.6	20.0	35.7	28.6	9.2
3 (N=176)	61	71	55	56	61	48	9
	34.7	40.3	31.3	31.8	34.7	27.2	5.1
4 (N=204)	54	75	53	67	69	56	17
	26.5	36.8	26.0	32.8	33.8	27.5	8.3
5 (N=242)	65	103	60	76	51	63	22
	26.9	44.6	24.8	31.4	21.1	26.0	9.1
6 (N=181)	46	91	39	76	47	46	40
	25.4	53.0	21.5	42.0	26.0	25.4	22.1
Total (N=998) N	282	398	258	323	273	264	107
%	28.2	39.8	25.8	32.3	27.3	26.4	10.7

It demonstrated that verbal bullying (39.8%) is the most prevalent form for both girls and boys, followed by rumors (32.3%), physical bullying (28.2%), belongings damage (27.3%), threat (26.4%), exclusion (25.8), and cyber bullying (10.7%). Among boys, physical bullying (39.7%) and verbal bullying (39.3%) were more common. Among girls, verbal bullying (40.5%) and rumors (35.9%) were more often used. In addition, the common forms of bullying in each grade showed some minor differences, to be specific, 1st grade: rumors (23.7%), verbal bullying (21.6%) and exclusion (21.6%); 2nd grade: verbal bullying (37.8%), physical bullying (36.7%) and belongings damage (35.7%); 3rd grade: verbal bullying (40.3%), physical bullying (34.7%) and belongings damage (34.7%); 4th grade: verbal bullying (36.8%), belongings damage (33.8%) and rumors (32.8%); 5th grade: verbal bullying (44.6%), rumors (31.4%) and physical bullying (26.9%); 6th grade: verbal bullying (53%), rumors (42%) and belongings damage (26%). According to the data, apparently, pupils who report their being bullied in one way were often bullied in other ways as well.

3.6. Locus of bullying

Table 7. Demographic characteristics of locus

Locus	Play-ground	Hallways/ Stairwells	Class (teacher in)	Class (teacher not in)	PE lesson	Lunch- room	Way to/ from school	Bus stop/ school bus	Some- where else
Gender	N								
	%								
Girls	48	51	19	57	27	11	13	6	40
(N=474)	10.1	10.8	4.0	12.0	5.7	2.3	2.7	1.3	8.4
Boys	109	170	42	215	47	18	16	9	66
(N=524)	20.8	32.4	8.0	41.0	9.0	3.4	3.1	1.7	12.6

Grade	N									
	%									
1 (N=97)	22	11	2	1	7	0	5	0	7	
	22.7	11.3	2.1	1.0	7.2	0.0	5.2	0.0	7.2	
2 (N=98)	17	16	4	21	3	0	3	0	14	
	17.4	16.3	4.1	21.4	3.1	0.0	3.1	0.0	14.3	
3 (N=176)	27	48	13	48	17	6	0	2	22	
	15.3	27.3	7.4	27.3	9.7	3.4	0.0	1.1	12.5	
4 (N=204)	34	39	11	43	15	11	7	2	18	
	16.7	19.1	5.4	21.1	7.4	5.4	3.4	1.0	8.8	
5 (N=242)	28	60	19	94	13	5	5	3	25	
	11.6	24.8	7.9	38.8	5.4	2.1	2.1	1.2	10.3	
6 (N=181)	29	47	12	65	19	7	9	8	20	
	16.0	26.0	6.6	35.9	10.5	3.9	5.0	4.4	11.1	
Total	N	157	221	61	272	74	29	29	15	106
	%	15.7	22.1	6.1	27.3	7.4	2.9	2.9	1.5	10.6

A good deal of bullying occurred in classrooms with teachers absent (27.3%), hallways/stairwells (22.1%) and playgrounds (15.7%) in which other staff were unable to regulate. Bullying sometimes also occurred in PE lessons (7.4%) and in classrooms with teachers present (6.1%); occasionally bullying may take place in the lunchroom (2.9%), on the way to and from school (2.9%), bus stops and school buses (1.5 %) or other places in the elementary schools (10.6%). For first-year pupils, playground (22.7%) was the “hot spot” of bullying. Some pupils reported that under many circumstances, slapstick may bring about bullying. However, in higher grades, bullying often occurred in the classroom with teachers absent and in hallways/stairwells that lack supervision.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1. Conclusion

Nearly half of pupils have been bullied over the past few months. There were gender and grade differences in bullying in Nantong elementary schools. The proportion of boys bullied was higher than that of girls and the proportion of higher grade pupils bullied was higher than middle and lower grade pupils; the ratio of fifth graders bullied was the highest. The frequency of being bullied differs from grade to grade; the number of pupils bullied at a lower frequency increased as their grades rose while the number of pupils bullied at a higher frequency had no significant grade difference. More victims would tell their classroom teachers and then their parents, friends, brothers and sisters and other people; on the contrary, 16.2% chose to suffer it silently and boys were more forbearing than girls; higher grade pupils were more forbearing than lower grade pupils. Boys were the subject that exerted bullying. Verbal bullying, rumors and physical bullying were the most prevalent forms for both girls and boys. The hot spot for bullying include classrooms (with teachers absent), hallways/stairwells and playgrounds.

4.2. Recommendations

1. Teacher education institutions are supposed to train primary school teachers, especially the classroom teachers, in governing bullying. They need to fully understand the prevalence and damage of bullying and to help them acquire the knowledge and skills of governing.
2. Elementary schools should practice systematic and proper prevention and reaction of bullying according to different grades at regular intervals and enable pupils to know what is bullying and impart appropriate response (ask teachers and elders for help instead of saying nothing or other inappropriate methods) to pupils.
3. Elementary schools ought to pay more attention to boys, make them aware of the detriment of bullying, guide them to experience the miseries of victims and explicitly inform the bullies the consequences they should undertake.
4. Propaganda and education of parents may work through parents-school, parent' QQ group and educational websites. Help them identify bullying, grasp the procedures and methods for response to bullying.
5. Primary school teachers and parents have to pay close attention to the changes in pupils' daily behavior and comprehend pupils' abnormal behavior. Judge whether they are involved in bullying as early as possible. If so, help pupils to pull through promptly and effectively.

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