

Impact of Classroom Climate on Bullying Behavior: An environmental psychology perspective

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Abstract

Classroom climate significantly shapes students' interactions, influencing bullying dynamics and intervention responses. This study investigates the role of classroom climate in reducing self-reported bullying (SBB), promoting constructive bystander responses (BRB), and enhancing proactive teacher interventions (TRB). Using a sample of 510 Chinese primary school students and employing validated questionnaires, results reveal that positive classroom environments reduce bullying ($\beta = -0.537$, $p < 0.001$), foster bystander support ($\beta = 0.533$, $p < 0.001$), and strengthen teacher interventions ($\beta = 0.538$, $p < 0.001$). These findings underscore the need for supportive educational spaces, offering actionable insights for enhancing students' well-being and school dynamics.

Keywords: Classroom Climate; Bullying Behavior; Bystander Responses; Environmental Psychology

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1.0 Introduction

Classroom climate plays a pivotal role in shaping the social and emotional experiences of students, influencing not only their academic outcomes but also their behaviors and interpersonal interactions within the school environment. From the perspective of environmental psychology, which examines the interplay between individuals and their surroundings, the classroom serves as a critical microenvironment that affects students' well-being and behavior (Tapia-Fonllem et al., 2020; Xiao et al., 2023). A well-structured and supportive classroom climate has been shown to enhance students' emotional safety, foster positive relationships, and promote prosocial behaviors (Barrett et al., 2015). Conversely, negative classroom environments characterized by poor teacher-student relationships and unclear norms can exacerbate conflicts and contribute to bullying behaviors (Rocchino & Liang, 2024). Addressing bullying requires a nuanced understanding of how classroom environments influence the social dynamics among students and their interactions with teachers.

Studies indicate that a positive classroom climate—marked by supportive teacher-student relationships, collaborative peer interactions, and well-defined behavioral norms—plays a crucial role in reducing bullying incidents and encouraging constructive bystander responses (Thornberg et al., 2018; Solberg & Olweus, 2003). Additionally, teacher interventions are pivotal in combating bullying, with proactive strategies contributing to the creation of safer and more inclusive educational spaces (Campaert et al., 2017).

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Together, these factors underscore the importance of adopting a systemic approach to address and mitigate bullying by focusing on the dynamics within the classroom environment.

To address these challenges, this study aims to examine how classroom climate—a multidimensional construct encompassing teacher support, peer dynamics, and classroom norms—shapes bullying-related outcomes. Specifically, it seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- To analyze the impact of classroom climate on students' bullying behaviors.

- To investigate the role of classroom climate in shaping constructive bystander responses to bullying.

- To evaluate how classroom climate enhances proactive teacher interventions in bullying situations.

By addressing these objectives, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how classroom climate influences the dynamics of bullying.

Building on prior research that underscores the importance of classroom climate in shaping student behavior (Thornberg et al., 2018; Solberg & Olweus, 2003), this study delves into the multifaceted relationships between classroom environment, bullying behaviors, bystander responses, and teacher interventions. The significance of classroom climate has been well-documented, with evidence indicating that supportive teacher-student relationships and peer collaboration are associated with reduced incidences of bullying (Campaert et al., 2017). Similarly, clear classroom norms have been shown to foster positive bystander actions, encouraging students to intervene constructively in bullying situations (Thornberg et al., 2022). By integrating these perspectives, this research investigates how these key elements interact to influence bullying-related outcomes in primary school settings.

Furthermore, this study draws attention to the practical implications of its findings, particularly for educators and school administrators. Creating a supportive classroom climate can empower students to become active participants in addressing bullying, while also equipping teachers with the tools and strategies needed to respond effectively. The study's focus on primary schools in China, where cultural and social dynamics may uniquely influence bullying behaviors and interventions, offers insights that extend beyond theoretical frameworks to practical, context-specific solutions. By emphasizing the interconnected roles of students, teachers, and classroom environments, this research contributes to a growing body of literature advocating for systemic, evidence-based approaches to mitigating school bullying.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 The Role of Classroom Climate in Student Behavior

Classroom climate refers to the overarching social, emotional, and academic environment within a classroom, shaped by teacher-student relationships, peer dynamics, and established norms (Qiu, 2022). Research highlights that a positive classroom climate fosters emotional safety and enhances students' prosocial behaviors, while a negative climate exacerbates interpersonal conflicts and disengagement (Luo et al., 2023; Glaesser et al., 2023). Specifically, classroom environments that emphasize cooperation and mutual respect reduce behavioral problems and promote a culture of inclusivity (Garrote et al., 2020).

Studies on classroom climate have linked its various dimensions to key student outcomes, such as academic achievement, emotional regulation, and social behavior (Thornberg et al., 2018). For example, classrooms characterized by strong teacher support provide students with a sense of belonging and trust, which in turn decreases disruptive behaviors (Thornberg et al., 2022). Similarly, clear behavioral norms foster consistency and predictability, reducing ambiguity and tension in peer interactions. These findings underscore the importance of classroom climate as a multidimensional construct that directly influences students' overall school experience.

2.2 Bullying in School Contexts

Bullying is a pervasive issue in educational settings, often defined as repeated aggressive behavior intended to harm or intimidate a victim (Olweus, 1994). It manifests in various forms, including physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying, each of which uniquely impacts victims' psychological and social well-being (Solberg & Olweus, 2003). Longitudinal studies have shown that children exposed to bullying are at a higher risk of developing anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal, highlighting the urgency of addressing this phenomenon.

The role of classroom climate in mitigating bullying behaviors has been widely studied. Positive classroom environments characterized by teacher vigilance and supportive peer relationships discourage the development of bullying dynamics (Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). In contrast, classrooms lacking clear norms and mutual respect create conditions where bullying thrives, often due to the absence of accountability and intervention mechanisms (Campaert et al., 2017). Thus, understanding the interplay between classroom climate and bullying behaviors is essential for designing effective anti-bullying strategies.

2.3 Bystander Responses to Bullying

Bystanders, who witness bullying incidents, play a critical role in either perpetuating or mitigating bullying. Their responses can range from passive observation to active intervention, influenced by personal, social, and environmental factors (Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). Research identifies three primary types of bystander behaviors: passive (remaining neutral or avoiding involvement), defending (supporting the victim or attempting to stop the bully), and assisting (siding with the bully).

Classroom climate significantly affects bystander behaviors. In environments where teachers and peers actively promote empathy and accountability, students are more likely to adopt defending behaviors (Thornberg et al., 2018). Conversely, negative climates

characterized by peer apathy and teacher disengagement often lead to passive or assisting responses. These findings suggest that fostering a supportive and inclusive classroom climate not only reduces bullying but also empowers bystanders to act constructively.

2.4 Teacher Interventions in Bullying

Teachers are pivotal in addressing bullying, as their interventions can disrupt harmful dynamics and establish behavioral norms. Effective teacher responses include supportive actions, such as providing assistance to victims, as well as disciplinary measures aimed at deterring future incidents (Demol et al., 2020). However, not all interventions yield the desired outcomes, with some strategies, such as non-intervention or overly punitive measures, potentially exacerbating the situation.

The classroom climate influences teachers' willingness and ability to intervene. Supportive environments where teachers feel connected to their students and perceive clear institutional backing encourage proactive responses (Garrote et al., 2020). Moreover, teacher training programs that emphasize relational strategies, such as mediation and group discussions, have been shown to enhance intervention effectiveness, creating a ripple effect of improved classroom dynamics (Campaert et al., 2017). These insights highlight the need for teacher-focused initiatives that align with broader efforts to cultivate positive classroom climates.

2.5 Gaps in Existing Research

Despite significant progress in understanding the role of classroom climate in bullying-related outcomes, several gaps remain. First, while existing studies emphasize the importance of classroom climate, few have employed higher-order structural equation models (HOC) to comprehensively examine the interrelationships among bullying behaviors, bystander responses, and teacher interventions. Such models provide a more nuanced understanding of these dynamics by integrating multiple dimensions of classroom climate.

Second, most research has been conducted in Western educational contexts, with limited attention to cultural and social factors influencing classroom dynamics in non-Western settings, such as China. This cultural gap is particularly relevant for understanding how societal norms and teacher-student relationships shape bullying and intervention strategies. Finally, while teacher interventions have been extensively studied, less is known about how these interventions interact with bystander behaviors, particularly in diverse classroom climates.

By addressing these gaps, this study contributes to the growing body of literature advocating for evidence-based approaches to improving classroom climates and mitigating bullying in schools.

3.0 Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional design to investigate the influence of classroom climate on bullying behaviors, bystander responses, and teacher interventions. The methodology includes a detailed description of participants, instruments, data collection procedures, and analytical methods.

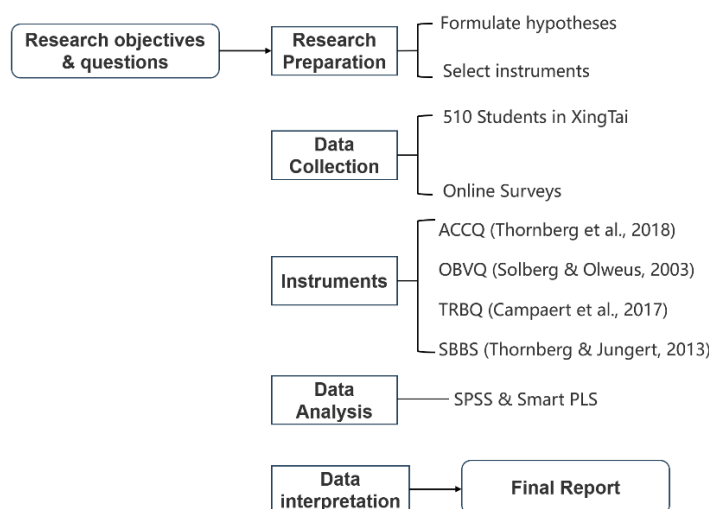


Figure 1. Methodological Framework: Research Process and Data Flow

3.1 Participants

The study sample consisted of 510 students aged 9 to 12 years, drawn from grades 4 to 6 in three public primary schools located in Xing Tai City, Hebei Province, China. These schools were purposefully selected to ensure homogeneity in socioeconomic and cultural contexts, thereby minimizing extraneous variability in classroom climate. The gender distribution was balanced, with 52% female and 48% male participants. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and parental consent was obtained before data collection. To ensure the reliability of self-reported responses related to bullying behaviors and bystander actions, students were instructed on confidentiality protocols prior to completing the survey.

3.2 Instruments

Data was collected using four validated questionnaires:

Authoritative Classroom Climate Questionnaire (ACCQ) (Thornberg et al., 2018): Assessed students' perceptions of teacher support (CCA), peer support (CCB), and classroom norms (CCC); Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (OBVQ) (Solberg & Olweus, 2003): Measured self-reported bullying behaviors (SBB); Teachers' Responses to Bullying Questionnaire (TRBQ) (Campaert et al., 2017): Examined teacher interventions, including supportive responses, disciplinary actions, mediation, group discussions, and non-intervention; Student Bystander Behavior Scale (SBBS) (Thornberg & Jungert, 2013): Evaluated bystander responses (BRB), such as passive, defending, and assisting behaviors. All constructs demonstrated strong reliability (Cronbach's Alpha > 0.70) and convergent validity (AVE > 0.50), as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Reliability and Validity of Constructs

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (rho_A)	Composite Reliability (rho_C)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
BRB	0.855	0.855	0.912	0.775
CC	0.895	0.897	0.923	0.705
SBB	0.916	0.917	0.941	0.799
TRB	0.803	0.805	0.884	0.718

3.3 Data Collection

Data collection took place in supervised classroom settings using an online questionnaire format to ensure efficiency and data confidentiality. Surveys were administered via school-provided computers, and students completed the survey in approximately 20 minutes. The online format reduced potential response bias and ensured standardized data collection. Classroom teachers supervised the sessions to maintain order, while researchers were available to clarify any ambiguities in survey items. Anonymity and confidentiality of responses were emphasized during the introduction to encourage honest reporting of sensitive behaviors such as bullying.

3.4 Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS Version 26 and SmartPLS 4.0. Descriptive statistics summarized demographic data, while Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) tested relationships among constructs. PLS-SEM, ideal for complex models with smaller samples, assessed path coefficients (e.g., CC → SBB: $\beta = -0.537$, $p < 0.001$) and evaluated explained variance ($R^2 > 0.25$) and predictive relevance ($Q^2 > 0$). Discriminant validity was confirmed by HTMT ratios (< 0.85), and convergent validity by factor loadings (> 0.70). Significant relationships, detailed in Section 4.0, were observed with all paths achieving $p < 0.05$.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Xing Tai Education Bureau, ensuring compliance with the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Written informed consent was secured from both students and their parents or legal guardians. Confidentiality was rigorously maintained, with no identifiable information collected, and data were used solely for academic purposes. To further protect participants, sensitive survey items (e.g., bullying behaviors) were presented with neutral phrasing to minimize distress.

4.0 Findings

This section presents the results of the statistical analyses, focusing on the relationships between classroom climate and bullying-related outcomes. The results are summarized using path coefficients, predictive relevance (Q^2), and variance explained (R^2), as shown in Table 2.

4.1 Classroom Climate and Self-Reported Bullying Behavior (SBB)

This study reveals a significant negative relationship between classroom climate (CC) and self-reported bullying behavior (SBB) ($\beta = -0.537$, $p < 0.001$), underscoring the crucial role of supportive classroom environments. Key dimensions of classroom climate—teacher support (CCA), behavioral norms (CCB), and peer dynamics (CCC)—work in tandem to mitigate bullying. The model's explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.289$) and predictive relevance ($Q^2 = 0.284$) highlight its robustness. This finding highlights how a supportive classroom climate holistically reduces self-reported bullying incidents, with an emphasis on the cultural role of collective harmony in amplifying its effects.

4.2 Classroom Climate and Bystander Responses (BRB)

The study found that positive classroom climates significantly influence constructive bystander behavior (BRB), as evidenced by a strong path coefficient ($\beta = 0.533$, $p < 0.001$). Students in supportive environments are more likely to actively intervene in bullying situations, often defending or supporting victims. The model accounted for 28.4% of the variance in bystander responses ($R^2 = 0.284$) and showed predictive relevance ($Q^2 = 0.281$). By highlighting the interaction between classroom norms and bystander behaviors in a non-Western context, the study underscores the influence of teacher authority in fostering proactive interventions, adding cultural depth to existing findings.

4.3 Classroom Climate and Teacher Interventions (TRB)

The analysis confirms that positive classroom climates enhance teacher interventions (TRB), with a highly significant path coefficient ($\beta = 0.538$, $p < 0.001$). Teachers in supportive classrooms are more proactive in addressing bullying, reflecting the model's strong explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.289$) and predictive relevance ($Q^2 = 0.286$). The findings demonstrate how supportive classroom climates enable teachers to adopt relational, culturally adaptive strategies, enriching the literature on proactive anti-bullying measures in education systems.

4.4 Summary of Key Findings

Positive classroom climate plays a critical role in mitigating bullying-related outcomes within schools. First, it significantly reduces self-reported bullying behaviors, as students in supportive classrooms characterized by teacher encouragement, clear norms, and positive peer interactions report fewer incidents of bullying. Second, a positive classroom climate fosters constructive bystander actions, encouraging students to actively intervene in bullying situations by supporting or defending victims. Lastly, it enhances teacher engagement, with educators in supportive environments demonstrating a higher likelihood of taking proactive measures to address and prevent bullying incidents. These findings collectively underscore the importance of cultivating a positive classroom climate to improve social dynamics and promote a safer school environment.

Table 2. Path Coefficients and Predictive Relevance

Relationship	Path Coefficient (β)	p-value	R^2	Q^2
CC \rightarrow SBB	-0.537	<0.001	0.289	0.284
CC \rightarrow BRB	0.533	<0.001	0.284	0.281
CC \rightarrow TRB	0.538	<0.001	0.289	0.286

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Classroom Climate and Student Behavior

This study reaffirms the critical role of classroom climate in shaping student behavior, consistent with Luo et al. (2023), who emphasized its influence on emotional safety and prosocial behavior. Our findings, however, highlight distinct cultural nuances, as teacher-student relationships in Chinese classrooms often prioritize collective harmony and authority. This emphasis may amplify the effects of supportive climates on reducing disruptive behaviors, a result not as strongly observed in studies like Glaesser et al. (2023), which reported limited effects on disengagement. These discrepancies underscore the need for further research into cultural contexts that shape classroom dynamics.

5.2 Bystander Responses

The relationship between classroom climate and bystander responses aligns with Thornberg & Jungert (2013), demonstrating that positive climates encourage defending behaviors. This study extends prior findings by emphasizing the role of clear classroom norms in empowering students to act constructively in bullying situations. While Qiu (2022) focused on the online classroom, our results indicate that similar mechanisms operate in traditional classroom settings. The cultural backdrop of this study further suggests that teacher authority and peer accountability are pivotal in fostering defending behaviors among students, offering new insights into how classroom climate can deter passive or complicit responses.

5.3 Teacher Interventions

Teacher interventions are significantly influenced by classroom climate, corroborating findings by Rocchino & Liang (2024) and Demol et al. (2020). Our results reveal that supportive environments not only enable proactive measures but also minimize overreliance on punitive strategies. This study uniquely highlights how relational harmony in Chinese classrooms encourages teachers to adopt mediation and supportive responses over disciplinary measures. This finding adds a cultural dimension to the literature, advocating for training programs that integrate relational strategies with broader efforts to improve classroom climate.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

This study highlights the critical role of classroom climate in shaping bullying-related outcomes. By integrating teacher support, peer dynamics, and classroom norms into a higher-order structural equation model, it demonstrates how these dimensions collectively reduce bullying, encourage constructive bystander responses, and promote proactive teacher interventions. The findings significantly contribute to educational psychology by emphasizing the importance of fostering supportive classroom environments, particularly in cultural contexts like China, where relational harmony plays a central role.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations, including its cross-sectional design, regional focus, reliance on self-reported data, and exclusion of psychological traits. These limitations highlight areas for improvement in future research.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to establish causal relationships, expand to diverse cultural settings for comparative insights, and explore psychological mechanisms such as emotional regulation and resilience. Additionally, investigating broader outcomes like academic performance and peer relationships would provide a more comprehensive perspective.

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of supportive classroom environments in shaping students' well-being and behaviors. By addressing cultural nuances and integrating educational practices, it provides actionable insights for reducing bullying globally.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study contributes to educational psychology by integrating multiple dimensions of classroom climate into a higher-order structural equation model, offering a comprehensive perspective on its impact on bullying-related outcomes. Framed within the principles of environmental psychology, it examines the classroom as a critical microenvironment where teacher support, peer dynamics, and classroom norms interact to shape student and teacher behaviors. The findings provide empirical evidence of how supportive educational environments foster psychological well-being and mitigate bullying. Furthermore, the study offers practical implications for educators and policymakers, providing strategies to cultivate inclusive and supportive classroom climates. By focusing on primary schools in China, this research extends the cross-cultural relevance of classroom climate studies, offering valuable insights into the interplay between cultural values and environmental factors in shaping educational practices.

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