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Classroom Climate Shapes Student Behaviour:
A mediated-moderation approach to bullying

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Abstract
This study investigates the relationships between teachers' responses to bullying (TRB), classroom climate (CC), and student bullying behaviour (SBB), with a focus on how grade level moderates these dynamics. The findings indicate that TRB significantly reduces SBB, with CC acting as a key mediator in this relationship. Notably, younger students (Grade 4) show a stronger response to teacher interventions compared to older students (Grade 6), highlighting the importance of developmental considerations in anti-bullying strategies. The study emphasizes the need for age-specific, environment-focused interventions to foster safer, more supportive classroom environments and reduce bullying.

Keywords: Teacher Responses to Bullying; Classroom Climate; Student Bullying Behaviour; Grade-Level Moderation

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study
School bullying is a pervasive global issue that adversely affects students' psychological well-being, academic performance, and social development. Research has consistently shown that students who experience bullying are at a higher risk of anxiety, depression, and reduced academic motivation, often leading to long-term psychological consequences (Smith et al., 2016). The problem is not confined to a specific region or culture but exists in varying forms across educational systems worldwide. Addressing bullying effectively requires a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to its occurrence, persistence, and resolution.

From an environmental and behavioural perspective, bullying is not merely an individual issue but a social phenomenon shaped by the surrounding environment. The classroom climate, which encompasses the relationships among students, teachers' behavioural management strategies, and the overall learning atmosphere, plays a crucial role in influencing students' behaviours (Thornberg et al., 2018). Despite a growing body of research on bullying, there remains a significant gap in understanding these dynamics in underexplored contexts, such as fourth-tier Chinese cities. In positive classroom environments where teachers actively engage in regulating student interactions, bullying incidents are reported less frequently. Conversely, in settings where teachers fail to intervene effectively, students

may perceive bullying as tolerated or even reinforced. This highlights the need to explore how teacher interventions shape classroom climates and subsequently influence bullying behaviour.

Despite a growing body of research on bullying, there remains a significant gap in understanding these dynamics in underexplored contexts, such as fourth-tier Chinese cities. While studies have extensively examined bullying in Western and highly urbanized regions of China, research in smaller, developing cities remains limited. These areas often have distinct educational environments, resource constraints, and cultural norms that may influence both teacher responses and student behaviours. Investigating bullying in this context is essential to developing targeted interventions that align with the specific needs of students and educators in such settings.

1.2 Study Aim and Objectives
The primary aim of this study is to examine the relationships between Teachers' Responses to Bullying (TRB), Classroom Climate (CC), and Student Bullying Behaviour (SBB) while exploring the moderating role of grade level in these dynamics.

To achieve this aim, the study sets out the following specific objectives:

To identify the direct effect of TRB on SBB—determining whether teacher interventions independently reduce bullying behaviours.

To determine whether CC mediates this relationship—investigating how classroom climate functions as an environmental factor that strengthens or weakens the influence of teacher responses on bullying behaviour.

To examine whether grade level moderates the TRB–SBB relationship—analyzing whether younger students are more responsive to teacher interventions than older students.

By addressing these objectives, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the environmental and behavioural mechanisms that influence bullying, providing practical insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers seeking to create safer and more supportive learning environments.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework
Bullying is a complex phenomenon influenced by the broader environmental and behavioural context (Hong et al., 2022). The environmental-behaviour perspective suggests that student behaviour is shaped by social interactions and the physical and structural settings (Thornberg & Wänström, 2018). This study examines bullying through the lenses of Social-Ecological Theory (SET), Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), and classroom climate. SET views bullying as a multi-level interaction within various systems, including classroom interactions (microsystem) and societal norms (macrosystem) (Morris et al., 2018).

Research shows teacher interventions can either foster or hinder bullying, depending on classroom conditions (Garandeau et al., 2019). SCT emphasizes how students learn from teachers' and peers' responses to bullying (Bandura, 2023). If teachers actively intervene, students are less likely to engage in bullying (Zych et al., 2020). A positive classroom climate, characterized by mutual respect and emotional safety, can reduce bullying (Konishi et al., 2024). The Authoritative School Climate Theory emphasizes the balance of support and structure in fostering healthier teacher-student and peer interactions (Kloo et al., 2023).

2.2 Teacher Responses to Bullying
Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping students' perceptions and behaviours related to bullying. Their responses can either reinforce anti-bullying norms or, conversely, enable such behaviours. Research categorizes teacher responses into active (e.g., disciplinary action, mediation, group discussions) and passive (e.g., ignoring incidents, blaming victims) approaches (Veenstra, 2022).

Recent studies highlight the effectiveness of immediate and consistent teacher interventions in reducing bullying incidents. For example, a meta-analysis by Yeager et al. (2019) found that schools with structured anti-bullying teacher interventions reported a 30–50% reduction in bullying cases. Additionally, supportive teacher responses, such as addressing victims' emotional needs and discussing bullying in the classroom, have been shown to foster more positive peer norms (Coyle et al., 2020).

Conversely, teacher inaction or inconsistent responses can exacerbate bullying. Thornberg et al. (2021) found that when teachers failed to intervene in bullying cases, bystanders were less likely to support victims, leading to increased victimization rates. Furthermore, implicit biases in teacher responses, such as downplaying relational bullying compared to physical bullying, can create an unbalanced approach to intervention (Gaffney et al., 2021).

Despite substantial research on teacher responses, two critical gaps remain:

First, the mediating role of classroom climate— Most studies assess teacher responses in isolation, without examining how these responses shape classroom norms and peer interactions.

Second, developmental differences in responsiveness to teacher interventions—Few studies explore how students of different ages respond differently to the same teacher interventions, which has implications for intervention strategies.

Addressing these gaps is essential to designing developmentally appropriate, classroom-focused anti-bullying policies.

2.3 Classroom Climate as a Mediator
The mediating role of classroom climate is an emerging area of focus in bullying research. Classroom climate refers to students' perceptions of their social environment, including relationships with peers and teachers, as well as the behavioural norms within the classroom (Wang et al., 2020).

A growing body of research suggests that teacher interventions shape the classroom climate, which in turn affects bullying behaviours. A longitudinal study by Huang and Cornell (2021) demonstrated that in classrooms where teachers consistently responded to bullying with clear disciplinary structures and support for victims, bullying incidents decreased over time. The authors found that students' perceptions of a safe and respectful classroom environment mediated the relationship between teacher responses and reduced bullying incidents.

Moreover, peer-group dynamics are significantly influenced by teacher behaviour. Classroom norms play a crucial role in bullying escalation or reduction (Wang et al., 2020). If teachers fail to address bullying, negative peer norms (e.g., acceptance of aggression) can develop, reinforcing hostile interactions among students.

Understanding the classroom climate's mediating role underscores the need for holistic anti-bullying approaches. Instead of focusing solely on teacher discipline, interventions should aim to foster a culture of respect, inclusivity, and peer accountability, as these factors significantly reduce bullying incidents over time (Konishi et al., 2022).

2.4 Bullying Behaviour and Grade-Level Differences
Bullying behaviours manifest differently across age groups, with younger students relying more on teacher authority and older students influenced more by peer dynamics (Wang et al., 2020).

Studies indicate that bullying peaks in late elementary and middle school, then gradually declines (Salmivalli et al., 2021). Younger students tend to engage in more direct, physical forms of bullying, while older students exhibit more relational and cyberbullying behaviours (Pouwels & Garandeau, 2021). The transition from teacher-dependent behaviour regulation to peer-influenced social norms is a key factor in this shift (Gaffney et al., 2021).

Huang and Cornell (2021) found that teacher interventions were most effective among younger students (Grades 4–5), who still perceive teachers as primary authority figures. In contrast, older students (Grade 6 and beyond) were more influenced by peer group norms, making teacher interventions less effective unless complemented by peer-led strategies. This suggests that anti-bullying programs should be adapted based on students' developmental stages, integrating strong teacher-led interventions in early grades and peer-involvement strategies in later grades.

In total, the literature underscores the interplay between teacher responses, classroom climate, and student bullying behaviour. Social-Ecological and Social Cognitive Theories highlight how teacher interventions shape environmental norms, influencing bullying dynamics. While essential, teacher responses are most effective when mediated by a positive classroom climate. Moreover, anti-bullying strategies must be developmentally tailored, as younger students respond more to teacher authority, whereas older students rely on peer influence. Understanding these complexities is key to enhancing intervention efficacy and creating safer school environments.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design
This study used a cross-sectional survey design to explore the relationships between teachers' responses to bullying (TRB), classroom climate (CC), and student bullying behaviour (SBB), focusing on the mediating role of CC and the moderating effect of grade level. The cross-sectional approach is efficient for collecting large-scale data within a short time frame, capturing students' perceptions of bullying incidents and classroom climate. Conducted in Xingtai City, Hebei Province, a fourth-tier city, the study offers insights into bullying dynamics in underexplored educational contexts.

3.2 Sample and Sampling
The study involved 510 students from Grades 4 to 6 across four public primary schools in Xingtai City, representing a total population of 770,800 students (Xingtai Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Using stratified random sampling, one key school was selected from each district (Xindu, Xiangdu, Renze, Nanhe). Students were randomly chosen within each school, with 84 students participating in a pilot study. This stratified approach ensured balanced representation and minimized biases associated with school-specific factors.

3.3 Data Collection
Validated questionnaires were used to measure the key variables in this study. Teacher Responses to Bullying (TRB) were assessed using the TRBQ (Campaert et al., 2017), which evaluates active and passive teacher interventions (α = .87). Classroom Climate (CC) was measured with the ACCQ (Thornberg et al., 2018), focusing on students' perceptions of teacher support and classroom norms (α = .86). Student Bullying Behaviour (SBB) was evaluated using the OBVQ (Solberg & Olweus, 2003), which measures bullying perpetration and victimization (α = .92). Minor adaptations were made for cultural relevance, confirmed through a pilot test with 84 students.

3.4 Data Analysis
Data analysis was performed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4.0 to examine the direct, mediating, and total effects of TRB, CC, and SBB. Bootstrapping (5000 resamples) was used to estimate path coefficients and significance levels. Additionally, hierarchical multiple regression in SPSS tested the moderating role of grade level, with simple slope analysis determining variations in TRB's impact on SBB across grades. Combining PLS-SEM and regression analysis provided robust insights into both direct and interactive effects.

3.5 Limitations

Despite the rigorous methodology, this study has several limitations. First, all data were collected via self-report questionnaires, which may introduce social desirability or recall bias. To reduce bias, anonymity was ensured and neutral wording was used. Second, the study was conducted only in Xingtai City, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future research should include multiple cities or provinces. Third, the cross-sectional design offers correlational, not causal, insights. A longitudinal design would be beneficial for causal interpretations. Finally, incorporating multi-informant approaches and mixed-methods could provide deeper insights into bullying dynamics. Despite these limitations, the study's robust methodology contributes valuable insights into environmental influences on bullying prevention.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Based on the descriptive statistics (see Table 1) provided for the study, the means and standard deviations of the three key variables—classroom climate (CC), student bullying behaviour (SBB), and teachers' responses to bullying (TRB)—were analyzed for each grade level (4th, 5th, and 6th).

For the 4th grade, the mean values for CC, SBB, and TRB were 3.39 (SD = 0.92), 1.72 (SD = 0.69), and 3.48 (SD = 0.62), respectively. In the 5th grade, the means were 3.38 (SD = 0.89) for CC, 1.72 (SD = 0.59) for SBB, and 3.51 (SD = 0.49) for TRB. For the 6th grade, the mean values for CC, SBB, and TRB were 3.49 (SD = 0.83), 1.70 (SD = 0.53), and 3.51 (SD = 0.55).

These results reflect a relatively consistent distribution across the three grades, with slightly higher means for TRB in the 5th and 6th grades compared to the 4th grade. The standard deviations indicate moderate variability in all three variables.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics Stratified by Grade Level

Grade		CC	SBB	TRB
4th Grade	Valid	116	116	116
	Mean	3.39	1.72	3.48
	Std. Deviation	0.92	0.69	0.62
5th Grade	Valid	305	305	305
	Mean	3.38	1.72	3.51
	Std. Deviation	0.89	0.59	0.49
6th Grade	Valid	89	89	89
	Mean	3.49	1.70	3.51
	Std. Deviation	0.83	0.53	0.45

4.2 Direct Effects

The direct effects of Teacher Responses to Bullying (TRB) on Student Bullying Behaviour (SBB) and Classroom Climate (CC) were tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results (see Table 2) showed that TRB has significant direct effects on both classroom climate and student bullying behaviour.

Table 2. Path Coefficients for Direct Effects

Path	Path Coefficients (β)	T statistics	P values
TRB → SBB	-0.31	6.32	0.001
CC → SBB	-0.29	6.3	0.001
TRB → CC	0.54	16.67	0.001

The path coefficient between TRB and SBB was found to be -0.31 (t = 6.32, p < 0.001), indicating that teacher interventions have a significant direct negative effect on bullying behaviour. Similarly, CC showed a significant direct effect on SBB with a path coefficient of -0.29 (t = 6.3, p < 0.001), suggesting that a positive classroom climate helps reduce bullying behaviour. Furthermore, TRB was significantly associated with CC (β = 0.54, t = 16.67, p < 0.001), demonstrating that teacher interventions enhance classroom climate. These findings emphasize the crucial role of both teacher responses and classroom climate in reducing bullying behaviour in the school environment..

These results show that teacher interventions do not only reduce bullying behaviours directly but also improve the classroom environment, which may further enhance the impact of these interventions.

4.3 Mediation Effects

A mediation analysis was conducted to assess whether Classroom Climate (CC) mediates the relationship between Teachers' Responses to Bullying (TRB) and Student Bullying Behaviour (SBB). Using the bootstrapping method with 5000 resamples, the results confirmed that CC plays a significant mediating role.

Table 3. Indirect Effect of TRB on SBB through CC

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Specific Indirect	Effect	T statistics	P values	95% Confidence Interval
TRB→CC-→SBB	-0.15	5.80	0.001	[-0.21 -0.10]

The indirect effect of TRB → CC → SBB was found to be -0.15 (p < .001), suggesting that classroom climate significantly mediates the relationship between teacher responses and bullying behaviour. This result highlights that a positive classroom environment enhances the effectiveness of teacher interventions in reducing bullying.

This finding supports Social-Ecological Theory, which posits that teacher responses shape environmental norms within the classroom. Meanwhile, these findings underscore the importance of fostering a positive classroom climate, as it strengthens the impact of teacher interventions on reducing bullying behaviour.

4.4 Moderation Effects

To explore the moderating effect of grade level on the relationship between Teacher Responses to Bullying (TRB) and Student Bullying Behaviour (SBB), hierarchical regression analysis was performed. The results indicated that grade level significantly moderates the relationship between teacher interventions and student bullying behaviour.

Table 4. Moderation Effects of Grade Level on the Relationship between TRB and SBB

Specific Indirect	Dependent Variable: SBB		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
(Constant)	4.15**(28.22)	4.16**(25.93)	5.26**(12.12)
TRB	-0.69**(-16.72)	-0.69**(-16.7)	-1.01**(-8.24)
Grade		-0.002(-0.07)	-0.61(-2.72)
TRB×Grade			0.18**(2.74)
R²	0.36	0.36	0.36
Adjusted R²	0.35	0.35	0.36
F	F=279.45 p=0.001	F=139.45 p=0.001	F=96.66 p=0.001

The results from Model 1 showed that TRB significantly predicted SBB (β = -0.69, p < .001), indicating that teacher interventions directly reduce bullying. In Model 2, grade level was added as a moderator, with the interaction term (TRB × Grade) showing a significant effect (β = 0.18, p < .01). This suggests that the strength of the TRB–SBB relationship varies by grade, with younger students (Grade 4) more responsive to teacher interventions, while older students (Grade 6) rely more on peer influences. The inclusion of grade level explained additional variance in SBB, with an adjusted R² of 0.36 for Model 3.

In conclusion, the results of this study emphasize the need for tailored, age-specific anti-bullying strategies that foster a positive classroom environment and address the unique developmental stages of students.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Direct Effect of Teacher Responses to Bullying (TRB) on Student Bullying Behaviour (SBB)

In this section, we discuss the direct effect of Teacher Responses to Bullying (TRB) on Student Bullying Behaviour (SBB), as revealed by the analysis. The findings showed a significant negative effect (β = -0.31), suggesting that proactive teacher responses are linked with a reduction in bullying behaviour. This is consistent with prior research, which highlights the critical role of teachers in addressing bullying (Thornberg et al., 2022). However, it also deviates from some studies suggesting that teacher interventions alone may not always lead to sustained reductions in bullying (Huang & Cornell, 2021). The differences may arise due to contextual factors, such as the regional context of this study in Xingtai City, where students may be more receptive to teacher authority due to cultural norms.

This finding supports Social-Ecological Theory, which posits that teacher responses shape environmental norms within the classroom, ultimately influencing student behaviour. It also suggests that teachers' proactive responses to bullying are essential in fostering a positive classroom environment and mitigating bullying, especially in the early stages of school education.

5.2 Mediation Effect of Classroom Climate (CC)

This section focuses on the mediation effect of Classroom Climate (CC) in the relationship between TRB and SBB. The results confirmed that CC significantly mediated the relationship (indirect effect = -0.15, p < .001), highlighting the importance of a positive classroom environment in enhancing the effectiveness of teacher interventions. This finding aligns with previous studies that suggest a supportive classroom climate acts as a catalyst for reducing bullying behaviour (Veenstra, 2022). However, unlike studies that highlight only the direct effects of teacher responses, this study emphasizes the indirect pathway through the classroom climate.

The finding expands the understanding of Social Cognitive Theory, emphasizing how teacher behaviour influences student perceptions and, in turn, affects their behaviour in a mediated manner via the classroom environment. Moreover, educators and policymakers should focus on creating supportive, safe, and positive classroom climates as part of anti-bullying strategies to maximize the impact of teacher interventions.

5.3 Moderation Effect of Grade Level on TRB–SBB Relationship

In this section, we explore the moderating effect of Grade Level on the TRB–SBB relationship. The findings indicated that grade level significantly moderated this relationship, with younger students (Grade 4) showing a stronger negative association between TRB and SBB compared to older students (Grade 6). The simple slope analysis, shown in the figure 1, further supports these findings. This result is consistent with developmental theories suggesting that younger students are more receptive to teacher authority, while older students tend to rely more on peer influence and self-regulation (Huang & Cornell, 2021). These findings are in line with studies showing a diminished effect of teacher interventions on older students, as they grow more autonomous (Konishi et al., 2022).

This finding resonates with the Social-Ecological Theory, as it suggests that different developmental stages of students (i.e., grade levels) interact with environmental factors (e.g., teacher responses) in complex ways. Additionally, the results indicate that anti-bullying strategies need to be tailored to developmental stages, with a greater emphasis on teacher authority and classroom control in lower grades, and a shift toward peer-based strategies and self-regulation in higher grades.
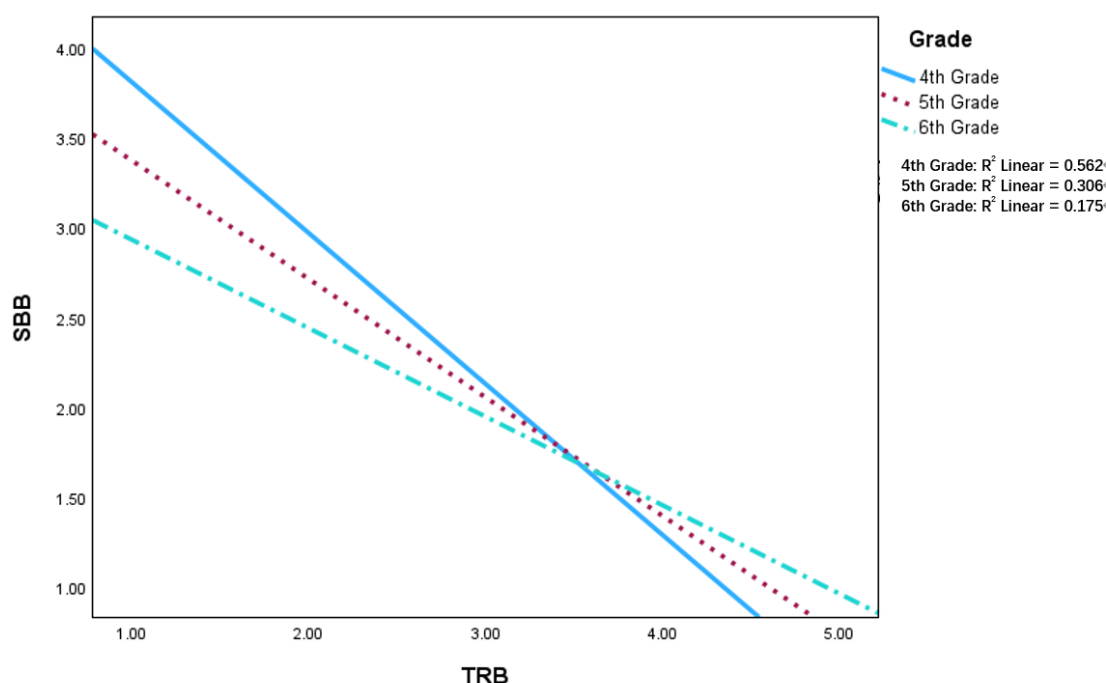

Figure 1. Simple Slope Analysis of the Moderating Effect

In this section, the integration of these results enhances our understanding of bullying dynamics through the lens of Social-Cognitive and Social-Ecological theories, revealing the complex interplay of environmental and individual factors shaping student behaviour. Moreover, the findings suggest that multi-faceted anti-bullying strategies, which account for both classroom climate and students' developmental stages, are essential for more effective bullying prevention.

6.0 Conclusion& Recommendations

6.1 Summary of Findings
This study examined the relationships between teacher responses to bullying (TRB), classroom climate (CC), and student bullying behaviour (SBB), focusing on grade level as a moderator. Findings revealed that TRB significantly reduced SBB, with CC acting as a key mediator. Younger students (Grade 4) showed a stronger response to teacher interventions than older students (Grade 6). These results emphasize the need for environment-focused, age-specific anti-bullying strategies.

6.2 Recommendations
Future research should include longitudinal and multi-site designs to enhance generalizability and explore the long-term impact of classroom climate. Practically, schools should implement grade-specific anti-bullying programs and enhance teacher training to foster positive classroom climates that effectively reduce bullying.

Acknowledgement

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This research contributes to the field of educational psychology by emphasizing the environmental-behavioural dynamics of bullying. Specifically, it highlights the role of teacher interventions and classroom climate in reducing bullying behaviours, offering new insights for developing effective, age-specific anti-bullying strategies in primary education settings.

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