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School collective efficacy and passive bystanding in bullying. A chain mediation model of school justice and sense of community

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Abstract | Introduction: The study of school factors capable of mitigating the passive response of bystanders is crucial for preventing bullying; however, research on this topic remains limited. The present study examined the relationships between school collective efficacy in managing bullying incidents and bystander passive behaviour in bullying. It also explores the mediating role of student perceptions of school justice and a sense of community in this relationship. **Method:** The study included 600 adolescents aged 12-16 ($M_{age} = 14.31$ years, $SD = 0.63$, 54% female) who completed self-reported measures assessing collective self-efficacy, school justice, school sense of community, and passive behaviour in bullying incidents. **Results:** Structural modelling analysis indicated that school collective efficacy was not directly associated with passive bystander behaviour in bullying incidents. However, it indirectly reduced passive bullying behaviour through school justice and the sense of the school community. **Conclusions:** These findings suggest that collective efficacy mitigates the frequency of passive bystander responses to bullying incidents only when students perceive their school environment as equitable and experience a sense of belonging to the school community.

Keywords: Bystanders, bullying, school collective efficacy, school justice, school sense of community

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Eficacia escolar colectiva y el espectador pasivo en el *bullying*. Un modelo secuencial de mediación de la justicia y el sentido de comunidad escolar

Resumen | Introducción: El estudio de los factores que disminuyen la respuesta pasiva de los espectadores es crucial en la prevención del *bullying*, sin embargo, la investigación en el tema es limitada. Este artículo examina la relación entre la eficacia colectiva escolar para manejar el *bullying* y la conducta pasiva de los espectadores con estos incidentes. Además, se explora el rol mediador de la percepción de los estudiantes de la justicia escolar y el sentido de comunidad escolar en estas relaciones. **Método:** El estudio incluye a 600 adolescentes con edades entre 12 y 16 años ($M_{edad} = 14.31$ años, $DE = 0.63$, 54 % mujeres) quienes respondieron medidas de autorreporte acerca de la eficacia escolar colectiva, justicia escolar, sentido de comunidad escolar y conducta pasiva de los espectadores en el *bullying*. **Resultados:** El modelo estructural indicó que la eficacia escolar colectiva no se relacionó directamente con la conducta pasiva de los espectadores. Sin embargo, esta variable influyó indirectamente en la conducta pasiva de los espectadores en el *bullying* mediante su influencia en la percepción

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de justicia escolar y el sentido de comunidad escolar. **Conclusiones:** Estos hallazgos indicaron que la eficacia colectiva de la escuela disminuye la frecuencia de conductas pasivas en los espectadores solo cuando los estudiantes perciben que su ambiente escolar es justo y experimentan sentido de comunidad con la escuela.

Palabras clave: Espectadores, *bullying*, eficacia colectiva escolar, justicia escolar, sentido de la comunidad escolar

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Bullying encompasses intentional, repetitive, proactive, and aggressive behaviours perpetrated by individuals against vulnerable peers (Hellström et al., 2021; Volk et al., 2014). This behaviour has a long-lasting effect on individuals, resulting in both internalised and externalised behavioural problems (Quintero-Jurado et al., 2022; Sourander et al., 2016), academic difficulties (Contreras et al., 2016; Delprato et al., 2017), and a long-term adverse effect on victims' mental health (León-Moreno et al., 2022; Schoeler et al., 2018). Bullying constitutes a widespread global issue among youth (Biswas et al., 2020; Herrera-López et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2023; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [Unesco], 2017). In Mexico, approximately 30% of adolescents report having experienced peer victimisation in educational settings (Comisión Nacional para la Mejora Continua de la Educación [Mejoredu], 2021, 2024).

The audience comprises individuals, referred to as bystanders, who observe bullying incidents but are not directly involved as aggressors or victims (Levy & Gumpel, 2018; Polanin et al., 2012). The extant literature indicates that bystander behaviour can moderate the incidence of bullying, mitigate the pervasive and long-term effects of bullying on victims, and, more significantly, promote a safer school environment. Specifically, bullying is expected to be reduced when a bystander intervenes as a defender. Conversely, when bystanders assist the perpetrator or remain passive, such actions are posited to reinforce aggressive behaviour (Campbell et al., 2023; Jenkins & Nickerson, 2019; Pouwels et al., 2016).

Interestingly, although most bystanders remain passive in bullying incidents (Jenkins & Nickerson, 2019; Ma & Chen, 2019), most previous research has focused on examining defensive or reinforcing bystander populations, neglecting the largest bystander group—passive bystanders. The significance of studying passive bystanders is that they may increase victims' negative emotional responses even more than assistants or reinforcers do (Ma & Chen, 2019). Furthermore, the literature has shown that when passive behaviour increases, assistant behaviour tends to increase (Thornberg & Wanstrom, 2018). Additionally, studies have shown that victims experience more negative emotions when they perceive the presence of passive bystanders, reporting feeling more ignored and less content (Ma & Chen, 2019).

As suggested above, even though the school environment influences bystander responses to bullying incidents (Konishi et al., 2021; Thornberg et al., 2022; Waasdorp et al., 2019; Xie & Ngai, 2020), there is a paucity of research on how specific school-related factors contribute to bystander passivity in bullying incidents.

School collective efficacy and its relation with bystander intervention

The concept of school collective efficacy is rooted in Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1998), which posits that an individual's behaviour is influenced by observing and interacting with others. Within this theoretical framework, collective efficacy refers to an individual's belief in the group's capacity to achieve desired outcomes effectively. In the context of bullying research, school collective efficacy encompasses the school members' perceptions of the school groups' capacity to mitigate peer aggression (Peraza-Balderrama et al., 2021; Williams & Guerra, 2011).

Research on bullying has shown a link between school collective efficacy and lower rates of negative student behaviours (Olsson et al., 2023; Takakura et al., 2019), bullying reports (Peraza-Balderrama et al., 2021; Thornberg et al., 2019), and bystander defender intervention in bullying events (Shi et al., 2024; Thornberg et al., 2020). However, the relationship between school collective efficacy in addressing bullying and the passive response of bystanders to bullying has received limited scholarly attention (Shi et al., 2024; Sjögren et al., 2020). Although such studies have identified a negative association, none has explored whether other school-related variables mediate this relationship. To address this gap in the literature, we examined the relationship between school collective efficacy and passive bystander behaviours in bullying situations, mediated by students' perceptions of school justice and sense of community.

Chain mediating role of appraisal of school justice and school sense of community

According to Bandura (2006) and Eccles (2008), a children's agency plays a crucial role in explaining the influence of social environments, enabling them to navigate and respond to agents' socialisation influences actively. Soenens and Vansteenkiste (2020) proposed a conceptual model of a children's agency on socialisation that posits that children's appraisal of socialisation practices and subsequent affective and behavioural responses are crucial elements of their agency, accounting for variations in developmental outcomes. Grounded in this framework, we posit that adolescents' perception of justice in school, which encompasses the belief that actions, processes, and equitable, impartial, and rational relationships within the educational institution (Ahmadi et al., 2020; Gorard, 2012), mediate the impact of school collective efficacy in addressing bullying on their propensity to engage in passive bystander behaviour. Although no research has specifically examined the relationship between school justice and passive res-

ponses to bullying, previous studies have demonstrated that the perception of school justice is associated with a greater willingness to intervene in gender-based violence (Rizzo et al., 2021) and reported bias-based bullying (Kim et al., 2023), suggesting the plausibility of this relationship.

Furthermore, based on the children's agency model in socialisation, we posit that students' appraisal of school characteristics influences their behaviour in bullying events. Specifically, student evaluation of school justice is expected to lead to the appraisal of the school's sense of community, which encompasses feelings of belonging and significance within the academic group, thereby satisfying personal needs through such membership (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Prati et al., 2017). Thus, we posit that school justice and a sense of community play a chain-mediating role between school collective efficacy (SCE) and passive response to bullying.

The present study

The extant literature on school collective efficacy in addressing bullying and its influence on bystander behaviour focuses on school variables mediating this relationship. This study addresses this gap by examining the association between school collective efficacy and bystander passive intervention in bullying incidents. Furthermore, this study examines how students' perceptions of school justice and school sense of community mediate the relationship between school collective efficacy and bystander passive behaviour in bullying incidents (see Figure 1).

Based on the literature, we considered the following hypotheses: Hypothesis 1 (H1): School collective efficacy is positively associated with school justice and a sense of community. Hypothesis 2 (H2): School collective efficacy is negatively linked to bystander passive bullying behaviour. Hypothesis 3 (H3): School justice and sense of community mediated the relationship between school collective efficacy and passive bystander behaviour in bullying.

Method

Participants

The sample was collected from 12 urban public secondary and 12 high schools in Sonora, Mexico. The schools were chosen using convenience sampling. All students from a single designated classroom at each participating school were included in the study. Initially, 618 students were included in the sample after excluding 18 students who did not sign the consent letter. This sample included 320 secondary students (53% females; M age = 12.67 years, SD = 0.57) and 280 high school students (55% females; M_{age} = 15.95 years, SD = 0.78). The research participants belonged to families with low and middle socioeconomic status, as is common in the Mexican public educational system (Instituto Nacional de Evaluación Educativa [INEE], 2019).

Measures

School collective efficacy to handle bullying

The School Collective Efficacy Scale (SCE; Peraza-Balderama et al., 2021), validated in a sample of Mexican adolescents, was used in this study. The SCE scale comprises 14 items that participants respond to on a five-point scale (0 = *never*, to 4 = *always*) grouped into three factors: (1) *Cohesion*, which assesses support among school members (6 items, e.g., "In my school everybody believes that bullying must be stopped," McDonald coefficient ω = .86); (2) *Student social control*, which involves students' informal practices that contribute to institutional order (4 items, e.g., "Students in my school intervene to stop bullying when they notice a peer experiencing any form of aggression from another student.," ω = .83); and (3) *Teacher social control*, which assesses teachers' informal practices that foster adherence to school rules (4 items, e.g., "Teachers in my school intervene to stop bullying when a student is pushed and provoked to fight with another student," ω = .84). A global score was established that would indicate collective efficacy considering that

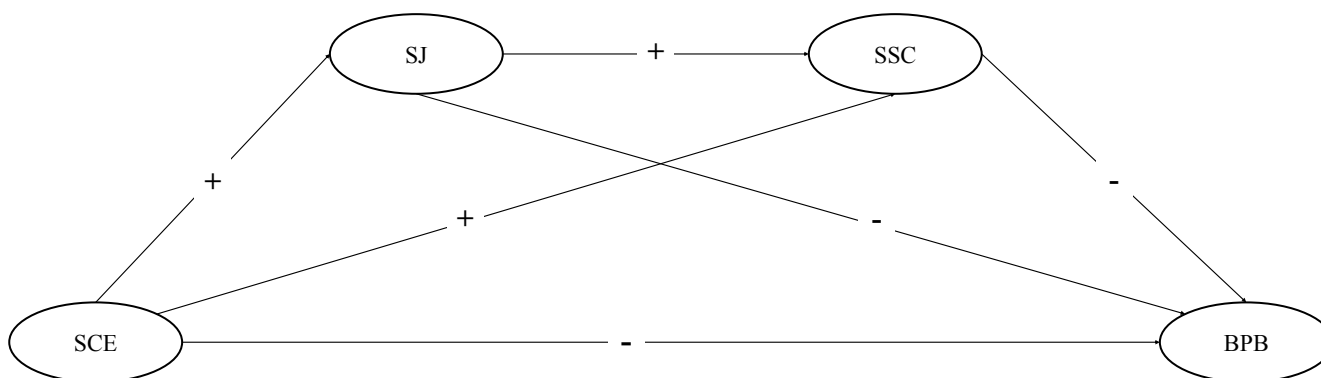


Figure 1. Theoretical model of the relationships between study variables

Note. SCE = school collective efficacy; SJ = school justice; SSC = school sense of community; BPB = Bystander passive behaviour.

the correlations between the factors ranged between .58 and .65.

School justice

The justice subscale of the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP; du Plessis & de Bruin, 2015) was modified to enable students to assess justice at the institutional rather than on an individual level. The subscale comprises nine items (e.g., In this school, students admit when they are wrong, McDonald $\omega = .80$) that were responded using a five-point scale (0 = *never*, to 4 = *always*). Confirmatory Factorial Analysis (CFA) provided support for the model's fit to the data ($SBX^2 = 50.28$, $df = 24$, $p = .002$; SRMR = .03; CFI = .97; TLI = .96; RMSEA = .05, 90% CI [.03, .06]).

School sense of community

The School Sense of Community Scale (SSCS; Prati et al., 2017) was translated from English to Spanish using the back-translation method. The SSCS comprises 11 items categorized into three dimensions: (a) *Membership* (3 items, e.g., "I am proud to belong to this school," $\omega = .77$), (b) *Emotional connection* (3 items, e.g., "I feel that I can share experiences and interests with other students in my school," $\omega = .81$), and (c) *Opportunities* (5 items, e.g., "I get involved in my school events," $\omega = .84$). Responses were rated on a five-point scale (0 = *never*, to 4 = *always*). CFA demonstrated that the model exhibited a good fit to the data ($SBX^2 = 57.24$, $df = 31$, $p = .003$; SRMR = .04; CFI = .99; TLI = .98; RMSEA = .03, 90% CI [.01, .04]). Given that the correlations between the factors ranged from .65 to .72, we opted to employ a global score for school sense of community.

Bystander passive intervention in bullying

The subscale of the Participant Role Scale (PRA; Alcántar Nieblas et al., 2018) was used in this study. This scale has been validated in a sample of Mexican adolescents. The PRA presents participants with a definition of bullying and subsequently asks about their responses when observing bullying incidents involving their peers. In instances where participants have not witnessed any bullying situations, they are asked how they would hypothetically react (3 items, e.g., "I do not do anything, I do not take sides," $\omega = .74$). The items were rated on a five-point scale (0 = *never*, to 4 = *always*).

Control variables

Gender and social desirability were statistically controlled in the study because responses in study variables are susceptible to social desirability biases and gender influences. Empirical studies have confirmed gender-based differences in bystander roles (Miranda et al., 2019; Mulvey et al., 2019; Thornberg & Wänström, 2018). Social desirability was measured using the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding Short Form (BIDR-16; Hart et al., 2015). This scale was a shortened version of the 40-item Balance Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR; Paulhus, 1984) and consists of two dimensions: (a) self-deceptive enhancement (8 items, e.g., "Never re-

gret decisions," $\omega = .88$), which reflects honest but overly positive responses, and (b) impression management (8 items, e.g., "Never cover up mistakes," $\omega = .86$), which captures the respondent's conscious effort to bias their response to appear favourable to others. Participants rated the items on a seven-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, to 7 = *strongly agree*). High values indicate a greater tendency towards social desirability in responses.

Procedure

Upon obtaining approval from the Ethical Committee of the Technological Institute of Sonora (Number 386), the principals of the selected schools were requested to grant authorisation to conduct the study in their institutions. Data were collected from public schools in which principals agreed to participate. Before data collection, parental or guardian consent was obtained after elucidating student participation research purpose and nature. Subsequently, permission was requested to include children in the study. Only 18 parents or guardians declined their children's participation, and those who permitted their children's involvement signed a consent letter. After acquiring the necessary approval, students were invited to participate voluntarily in the questionnaire-based research. The students were informed they could withdraw from the study without any consequences. All students agreed to participate and signed a consent letter. Data collection took place in the classroom during school hours.

Data were collected on output variables, including school sense of community and bystander passive response, as well as input variables, such as school collective efficacy and school justice, with a two-week interval between the two data-collection periods. Confidentiality of participation was guaranteed, and participants were informed that the data would be utilised exclusively for the scientific purposes of this study.

Data analysis

The percentage of missing data for the variables was less than 5%. Missing data were imputed using multiple imputation techniques available in the SPSS 27. Means, standard deviations, Spearman's correlations, and structural modelling were calculated using JASP 0.18.1. Per the guidelines proposed in the literature, values of $r > .10$ were considered to indicate a small effect size, $r > .20$ a medium effect size, and $r > .30$ a large effect size (Funder & Ozer, 2019; Gignac & Szodorai, 2016). An intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) value of .08 suggests minimal clustering within schools, with most variance occurring at the individual level (Lai & Kwok, 2015).

To analyse whether the self-reported measures used in the study introduced bias, we employed the unmeasured latent method construct to compare a model that incorporates the study variables with all observable items with a model with an unobservable construct associated with all items. The results confirmed that common method variance did not significantly bias the data ($\Delta\chi^2 = 1.31$, $df = 1$, $p = .252$) (Williams & McGonagle, 2016).

A robust maximum likelihood estimator (MLM) was employed (Finney & DiStefano, 2013). The Satorra-Bentler scaled chi-squared test, and its associated probability ($S-B\chi^2$ with $p > .001$) were utilised to evaluate the model's goodness-of-fit. Given the sensitivity of $S-B\chi^2$ to sample size, additional fit indices were examined, including the Comparative Fit Index ($CFI \geq .95$), Tucker-Lewis fit index ($TLI \geq .95$), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation ($RMSEA \leq .08$), and Standardised Root Mean Square Residual ($SRMR \leq .08$; Kline, 2023).

Results

Preliminary analyses

Table 1 presents descriptive and correlational analyses. The mean indicated that students occasionally perceived collective school efficacy in addressing bullying. Furthermore, they seldom perceived school as fair and experienced a sense of school community. The results demonstrated a substantial positive correlation between school collective efficacy, school justice, and school sense of community, with a high effect size. Furthermore, moderate effect-size correlations were observed among school justice, school sense of community, and passive bystander behaviour. Although the results indicated a significant negative correlation between school collective efficacy and passive bystander beha-

viour, the size of the correlation suggests that it lacks substantial theoretical and practical implications.

No significant correlations were observed between the control variables (gender and social desirability) and school collective efficacy, school sense of community, or school justice. However, social desirability exhibited a significant correlation with passive bystander behaviour, although the effect size lacked theoretical or practical implications (Funder & Ozer, 2019; Gignac & Szodorai, 2016). In contrast, gender demonstrated a significant correlation with passive bystander behaviour, with an effect size indicating theoretical and practical relevance. Consequently, only the path between gender and passive bystander intervention was incorporated into the structural model.

Structural equation modelling

Structural equation modelling demonstrated adequate goodness of fit to the data ($S-B\chi^2 = 345$, $df = 93$, $p < .001$; $SRMR = .05$; $CFI = .97$; $TLI = .96$; $RMSEA = .05$, $CI\ 90\% [.03, .08]$). This model accounts for 21% of the variance in the passive behaviour of the bystander. School collective efficacy was not directly associated with passive bystander behaviour. Furthermore, school justice and sense of community demonstrated direct negative associations with passive bystander behaviour (see Figure 2).

Table 1. Means, standard deviation, and correlations between variables in the study

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. School collective efficacy	2.26	0.90	-	.39***	.41***	-.06*	.09*	.07
2. School sense of community	2.71	0.75		-	.33***	-.26***	-.03	.06
3. School justice	2.30	0.82			-	-.25***	-.04	.04
4. Bystander passive behaviour	3.05	0.89				-	-.14**	.08*
5. Gender							-	.06
6. Social desirability	2.02	0.56						-

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

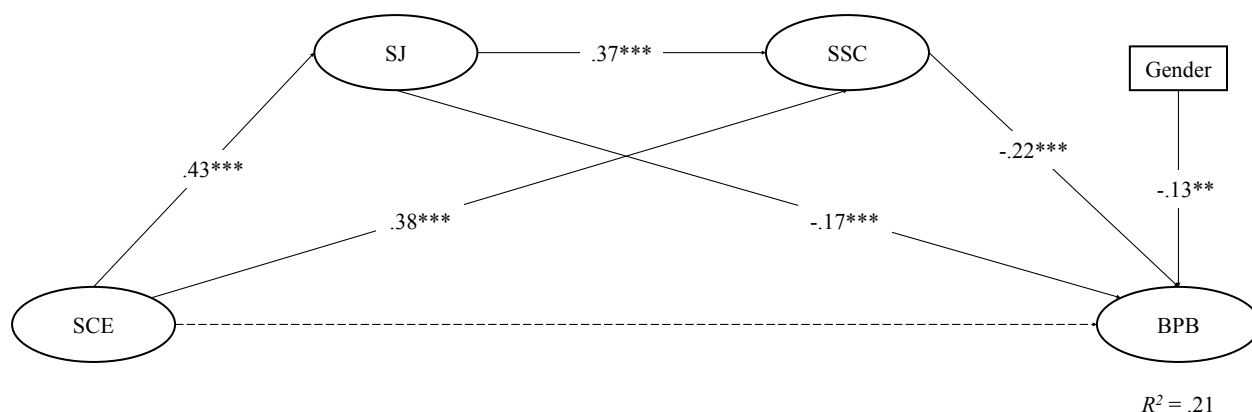


Figure 2. Structural equation modelling results for the study variables

Note. SCE = school collective efficacy; SJ = school sense of community; SSC = school justice; BPB = Bystander passive behaviour; gender 0 = male, 1 = female. Standardised coefficients were reported. Non-significant relationships were represented with dashed lines. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Regarding indirect relationships, the results indicated that school justice ($\beta = -.07, p < .05, 95\% \text{ CI } [.05, .13]$) and sense of community ($\beta = -.08, p < .05, 95\% \text{ CI } [.03, .09]$) were single mediators in the relationships between school collectives. Furthermore, the chain-mediating effect of students' perception of school justice and their sense of school community was negative and statistically significant ($\beta = -.04, p < .05, 95\% \text{ CI } [.01, .09]$).

Discussion

Unlike most previous studies in the literature related to bullying, this study aimed to investigate the potential factors that may influence the behaviour of the largest bystander group, passive bystanders, in bullying incidents to predict and mitigate its prevalence. In line with previous research (Konishi et al., 2021; Mulvey et al., 2021; Thornberg et al., 2020) and recognising that educational institutions serve as the second most significant socialising agent for individuals after the family, this study explores the association between school collective efficacy and the adoption of passive bystander behaviour during bullying incidents. Moreover, to better understand the influence of school collective efficacy on adopting passive behaviour in bullying bystanders, this study also examined the mediating role of student's perceptions of school justice and their sense of community in the proposed relationship. Our findings reveal that collective efficacy does not influence bullying bystanders' adoption of passive behaviours. Nevertheless, the chain model findings suggest that adolescents' perceptions of justice in school and their sense of school community mediate the negative relationship between school collective efficacy and bystander passive behaviour in bullying.

The importance of school collective efficacy

Contrary to previous studies (Shi et al., 2024; Sjögren et al., 2020), the hypothesised negative direct relationship between school collective efficacy and bystanders' passive behaviour was not supported by the data. In this context, it is noteworthy that, unlike the present study, previous research measured collective efficacy at the classroom level. Consequently, our findings may suggest that students' perception of classroom collective efficacy in addressing bullying may have a more substantial impact than their perception of school collective efficacy on passive bystander behaviour. We posit that the effects of collective efficacy at the school level could be more diluted than those at the classroom level because of the potential for a lessened connection and commitment within a larger group. However, additional research is necessary to investigate these relationships comprehensively.

Furthermore, in line with our hypothesis, we found that school collective efficacy in addressing bullying relates to students' perception of school justice and their sense of school community (Ahmadi et al., 2020; Capone et al., 2018). These findings confirm that collective efficacy in handling bullying can have wider benefits beyond simply addressing bullying incidents because it is positively associated with the student's perception

of school as fair and their sense of school community, both of which are negatively associated with passive bystander behaviour in bullying (Campbell et al., 2023; Knox et al., 2021). Thus, policymakers and administrators should consider enhancing the school community's capacity to manage bullying effectively. This approach not only directly addresses bullying but also strengthens the school's overall social and emotional environment, enhancing the capacity of the school community to manage bullying effectively. This approach directly addresses bullying and strengthens the school's overall social and emotional environment.

Indirect relationships

The findings indicate that adolescent agency mediates the relationship between school socialisation efforts and students' social behaviours. As hypothesised, students' perceptions of school justice and their sense of community within the educational institution constitute critical components of student agency that elucidate the influence of collective efficacy on bystander behaviour in addressing bullying incidents. Although the data do not provide evidence of a direct relationship between SCE and bystander passive behaviours, it demonstrates that students' perceptions of school justice and their sense of community fully mediate this relationship.

These findings substantiate the efficacy of the model of adolescent agency in socialisation (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2020) in elucidating how adolescent agency mediates the impact of school socialisation efforts. The results support the proposition that when students perceive social interactions within the school environment as equitable, their sense of belonging to the institution increases, reducing their passive response to bullying incidents. Thus, school justice and a sense of community function as mechanisms through which students are motivated to engage in victim defense behaviours rather than maintain passivity.

Limitations

The findings that school collective efficacy reduces passive bystander behaviour through students' perception of school justice and sense of community are significant but possess several limitations when considered within the broader context of bullying research and anti-bullying interventions. The study employed a cross-sectional design, which constrains the ability to establish causal relationships and fails to capture the temporal dynamics of these interactions. To address this limitation, we suggest that future research adopt experimental or longitudinal methodologies to elucidate the directionality and evolution of the relationships amongst the studied variables over time.

Although our findings confirmed the mediational role of school justice and school sense of community between school collective efficacy and passive bystander behaviours, it is recommended to investigate other school variables that, in conjunction with SCE, could decrease passive behaviours during bullying episodes. This issue constitutes a critical area of research in the

field, considering that outsiders comprise the majority of bystanders (Eijigu & Teketel, 2021; Pouwels et al., 2016), and there is limited research attempting to elucidate this role. Furthermore, additional research is necessary regarding the effects of school variables on personal traits that may mediate how school-level factors influence bystander behaviour. Future studies should include these individual-level variables to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

Finally, the findings may lack generalisability across all school contexts. Cultural norms, socio-economic conditions, and other contextual factors can significantly shape how school collective efficacy, justice, and community are perceived and how they influence student behaviour in bullying situations. Future research should consider these contextual variations to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships among the variables.

Conclusions

School collective efficacy in addressing bullying does not directly reduce passive bystander behaviour. This finding suggests that even when an educational institution demonstrates effectiveness in managing bullying incidents, it may not immediately influence students' tendency to remain passive when witnessing such events. Instead, the results indicate that students' perception of equity in institutional practices and policies plays a pivotal role. When students perceive their school as fair and equitable, they are more likely to develop a stronger sense of community, which, in turn, contributes to a reduction in passive bystander behaviour. These results highlight the importance of addressing not only the operational effectiveness of schools in managing bullying but also the underlying cultural and relational factors that shape student behaviour. Anti-bullying interventions that effectively reduce passive bystander behaviour should build a strong sense of community and ensure justice in school policies and practices. These are essential for empowering students to intervene actively in bullying situations.

Conflict of interest

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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