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Compassionate Concern as an Informal Institution: A Multiple-Case Study of Anti-Bullying Governance in Primary and Secondary Schools

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Keywords:

school bullying
informal institutions
human capital
Confucian compassionate
concern
care ethics
peer intervention

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

School bullying generates negative externalities for victims, peers, and schools by undermining student well-being, classroom order, and long-term human capital formation. Yet anti-bullying governance in primary and secondary education is still largely organized around formal rules, surveillance, and sanctioning. This study examines whether value guidance grounded in Confucian compassionate concern can function as an informal institutional resource that reduces moral distance, strengthens a

culture of care, and activates peer intervention. Using directed content analysis of five anti-bullying cases from Chinese primary and secondary schools, the study identifies a recurrent mechanism linking moral-emotional activation, the institutionalization of caring norms, and direct, indirect, and spontaneous peer intervention. The findings indicate that compassionate concern and care ethics should not be understood merely as private virtues. When translated into school charters, classroom routines, and symbolic recognition, they operate as collective norms that complement formal governance. From an economic perspective, such norms can lower the monitoring burden placed on teachers, mitigate bystander inaction as a collective-action problem, and improve the efficiency and sustainability of anti-bullying governance. The study contributes to the literature by integrating Confucian ethics, care ethics, and an informal-institutions perspective in the analysis of school governance. It also provides a culturally grounded explanation of how moral values can be embedded in organizational routines to generate cooperative behavior. Policy implications suggest that anti-bullying strategies should move beyond punishment-centered design and invest in empathy-based curricula, peer-support systems, and norm formation as low-cost complements to formal regulation.

1. Introduction

School bullying has become a persistent concern in educational governance because its consequences extend beyond immediate psychological harm. In economic terms, bullying creates negative externalities that affect not only victims but also classmates, teachers, and schools as organizations. It can reduce students' capacity to participate in

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Citation: To be added by editorial staff during production.

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learning, weaken classroom cooperation, and generate downstream losses in human capital accumulation. At the organizational level, bullying also raises monitoring, disciplinary, and coordination costs, thereby reducing the efficiency of routine school governance.

Despite these broad social costs, anti-bullying strategies in primary and secondary schools remain dominated by formal institutional instruments such as rules, surveillance, reporting mechanisms, and ex post punishment. Such measures are indispensable, but their effectiveness is often limited when bullying takes covert, relational, or socially normalized forms. Studies have shown that punitive or rule-based approaches alone are less effective in addressing relational aggression, verbal exclusion, and bystander apathy, especially in secondary school settings (Smith et al., 2018; Gaffney et al., 2021; Yang & Salmivalli, 2023). The problem is not only that formal rules are imperfectly enforced; it is also that bullying is embedded in peer relations, moral emotions, and everyday classroom norms.

This limitation points to a classic governance issue: formal institutions are costly and often incomplete when behavior depends on decentralized interaction among many actors. In such contexts, informal institutions—shared norms, moral expectations, and internalized obligations—may play a crucial complementary role. For school bullying prevention, the relevant question is therefore not only how schools punish harmful behavior, but also how they cultivate prosocial norms that motivate students to intervene before harm escalates.

Care ethics has provided an important lens for understanding the moral and relational dimensions of peer interaction. However, most care-ethics scholarship in this field is rooted in Western ethical traditions and pays limited attention to indigenous moral resources that may shape school governance in non-Western contexts. In the Chinese context, Confucian compassionate concern—the affective disposition to respond to others’ suffering—offers a locally grounded moral vocabulary that may help explain why students come to view intervention not as an optional act of kindness but as a normative responsibility.

Against this background, this article develops a dialogue between care ethics and Confucian ethics and asks how compassionate concern functions as a value-guiding mechanism in primary and secondary schools. More specifically, it investigates whether compassionate concern can be translated into an institutionalized culture of care that reduces moral distance between bystanders and victims and thereby activates peer intervention.

The article makes three contributions. First, it reframes school bullying as both an ethical and governance problem by showing how moral emotions operate as informal institutions. Second, it introduces an economic perspective by explaining why value-based norms can improve governance efficiency through lower monitoring costs and stronger decentralized cooperation. Third, it offers a culturally embedded account of anti-bullying governance by integrating Confucian compassionate concern into an analytical framework that has largely been dominated by Western ethical concepts.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Formal Governance and the Limits of Rule-Centered Approaches

Research on school bullying has traditionally emphasized laws, school regulations, multi-level governance arrangements, and formal intervention programs. Cross-national evidence suggests that clearly articulated anti-bullying rules and consistent enforcement can reduce visible and direct forms of bullying, particularly in primary school settings (Gaffney et al., 2021; OECD, 2023). However, the effectiveness of such approaches tends to decline when bullying is relational, indirect, or embedded in peer cultures that normalize exclusion and silence (Yang & Salmivalli, 2023).

This pattern suggests that anti-bullying governance cannot be understood solely as a problem of formal control. Because much bullying unfolds in settings characterized by incomplete supervision, teachers face information asymmetries and enforcement constraints. A governance model that depends exclusively on adult monitoring is therefore costly and reactive. It can suppress visible incidents without necessarily transforming the social conditions that make bullying sustainable.

2.2 Peer Norms, Care Ethics, and Bystander Intervention

A second stream of research highlights the importance of school climate, classroom norms, and peer behavior. Bystanders are now widely recognized as key actors because their reactions can either interrupt bullying or tacitly legitimize it. Indeed, peer intervention often has a more immediate effect on the continuation or termination of bullying than formal rules alone (Salmivalli, 2014; Meter & Card, 2023).

Within this line of inquiry, care ethics has become an influential framework for explaining why students may respond to the suffering of others. Studies show that when schools strengthen care, empathy, and responsibility through classroom interaction, social-emotional learning, and peer support practices, students become more likely to identify with victims and intervene (Thornberg & Jungert, 2013; Jungert et al., 2021; Malti et al., 2022). This work is valuable because it moves anti-bullying research beyond deterrence and toward relational accountability.

2.3 Informal Institutions, Compassionate Concern, and the Research Gap

Even so, two important gaps remain. First, the literature has paid limited attention to how moral emotions become institutionalized rather than remaining at the level of individual dispositions. Second, the dominant ethical vocabulary continues to be Western, while indigenous moral traditions have rarely been incorporated into explanatory models of school bullying prevention.

Confucian compassionate concern provides a productive entry point for addressing both issues. As a moral emotion oriented toward the recognition of suffering, it resonates strongly with care ethics; yet it also carries a distinctive normative implication in that emotional responsiveness is tied to self-cultivation, relational obligation, and the ordering of social life. From a governance perspective, compassionate concern may therefore be understood as a basis for informal institution building: when schools repeatedly encode such values into charters, routines, recognition systems, and moral narratives, they create expectations that shape behavior even in the absence of direct supervision.

This perspective also introduces an economic insight. If peer intervention is treated as a collective-action problem, then bystander apathy resembles a form of free riding: each student may prefer that someone else intervene while they avoid social risk. A culture of care can alter this incentive structure by making intervention morally expected and indifference morally costly. In this sense, informal institutions may complement formal governance by reducing enforcement dependence and generating cooperative peer responses at lower cost.

Accordingly, this study addresses two research questions:

- (1) Does Confucian compassionate concern share a compatible moral foundation with care ethics in anti-bullying school practice?
- (2) Can value guidance centered on compassionate concern be institutionalized into a culture of care that activates peer intervention and improves governance effectiveness?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative multiple-case design combined with directed content analysis. The purpose is not to estimate causal effects statistically, but to identify a plausible mechanism through which value guidance is translated into observable anti-bullying practices. A case-based strategy is appropriate because the study examines how ethical ideas, organizational routines, and peer behavior are connected in context-specific school settings.

Directed content analysis was selected because the study begins with a theoretically informed framework—moral-emotional activation, institutionalized care norms, and peer intervention—while still allowing iterative refinement during coding. This approach is particularly suitable for examining whether compassionate concern functions as an informal institutional resource rather than merely an abstract moral ideal.

3.2 Case Selection

Cases were selected through purposive sampling with an emphasis on theoretical relevance. The selection strategy privileged cases that could illuminate the sequence of value guidance, culture-of-care formation, and peer intervention. Four criteria guided inclusion:

- (1) the case had to involve a primary or secondary school setting;
- (2) the textual material had to provide a sufficiently complete account of the bullying incident, intervention process, and outcome;
- (3) the case had to include explicit evidence of emotional arousal, value guidance, or peer intervention rather than relying solely on disciplinary sanction; and
- (4) the source had to be publicly available and verifiable.

Following these criteria, five cases from different regions and school levels were selected: a Jiangsu public primary school's "Peer Guardians" practice; a Zhejiang junior high school's anti-indifference activity; a Guangdong primary school's class-charter-based intervention; a Sichuan junior high school's collective peer intervention case; and

a Shandong primary school's empathy-based curriculum practice. The cases vary in region, school type, and intervention format, which strengthens the analytical range of the study.

3.3 Data Analysis and Coding Framework

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, all texts were read repeatedly to identify segments related to bullying context, emotional cues, value statements, institutional arrangements, and peer behavior. Second, segments were coded using a theory-informed framework and then compared across cases. Third, recurring patterns and meaningful variation were synthesized once coding reached interpretive stability.

The coding framework was organized into three analytical levels: moral emotion, school culture, and behavioral response. This structure reflects the proposed mechanism in which compassionate concern is first activated as an affective response, then translated into shared norms, and finally expressed through concrete forms of peer intervention.

The coding framework was structured into three layers: moral sentiment, school culture, and behavioral response, corresponding to RQ1 and RQ2 (see Table 1).

Table 1. Coding Framework and Correspondence with Research Questions.

Analysis Level	Coding Dimension	Code ID	Code Name	Operational Definition	Corresponding RQ
Moral Emotion Level	Emotional arousal of compassionate concern	E1	Sympathy Narrative	The text describes the victim's condition, emotions, or consequences in a way that elicits sympathy and concern.	RQ1
Moral Emotion Level	Emotional arousal of compassionate concern	E2	Emotional Resonance Guidance	Teachers or schools guide students to imagine the victim's experience and reflect on how they would feel in the same position.	RQ1
Moral Emotion Level	Emotional arousal of compassionate concern	E3	Expression of Moral Discomfort	Students or teachers explicitly reject bullying as unacceptable or morally disturbing.	RQ1
School Culture Level	Institutionalization of care culture	C1	Clarification of Care Norms	Schools or classes define expected caring and supportive behavior through charters, routines, or institutional statements.	RQ2
School Culture Level	Institutionalization of care culture	C2	Positive Value Evaluation	The text positively evaluates,	RQ2

Analysis Level	Coding Dimension	Code ID	Code Name	Operational Definition	Corresponding RQ
School Culture Level	Institutionalization of care culture	C3	Reflection on Indifference	rewards, or symbolically recognizes caring and intervention behavior. Students are guided to reflect on the moral implications of bystander inaction, not only the wrongdoing of perpetrators.	RQ2
Behavioral Response Level	Manifestation of peer intervention	A1	Direct Intervention	Students directly stop or interrupt bullying behavior.	RQ2
Behavioral Response Level	Manifestation of peer intervention	A2	Indirect Intervention	Students report the incident, seek teacher assistance, or mobilize adult support.	RQ2
Behavioral Response Level	Manifestation of peer intervention	A3	Emotional Support Behavior	Students comfort, accompany, or protect victims after the incident.	RQ2
Behavioral Response Level	Manifestation of peer intervention	A4	Spontaneous Intervention	Intervention occurs without explicit teacher instruction, suggesting value internalization.	RQ2

4. Results

The five cases display a consistent pattern in which bullying prevention becomes more effective when value guidance is converted into shared expectations rather than remaining an abstract moral appeal. Across cases, compassionate concern appears not simply as an emotion but as a governance mechanism that links moral interpretation, institutional reinforcement, and peer action.

Table 2. Coding Results of Five Primary and Secondary School Anti-Bullying Cases

Case ID	School Level	E1 Sympathy Narrative	E2 Emotional Resonance Guidance	E3 Expression of Moral Discomfort	C1 Clarification of Care Norms	C2 Positive Value Evaluation	C3 Reflection on Indifference	A1 Direct Intervention	A2 Indirect Intervention	A3 Emotional Support	A4 Spontaneous Intervention
Case 1: Jiangsu Primary School "Peer Protection"	Primary	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	△	✓	✓	✓	✓
Case 2: Zhejiang Junior High "Anti-Indifference"	Junior High	✓	✓	△	△	✓	✓	△	✓	✓	△
Case 3: Guangdong Primary School Class Charter	Primary	△	△	✓	✓	✓	△	△	✓	✓	✖
Case 4: Sichuan Junior High Collective Intervention	Junior High	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	△	✓	✓
Case 5: Shandong Primary School "Empathy Curriculum"	Primary	✓	✓	△	✓	✓	△	△	✓	✓	✓

Legend: ✓ = Clearly present; △ = Limited or indirectly reflected; ✖ = Absent or not mentioned in the text

4.1 Moral Activation: From Sympathy to Normative Attention

All five cases contain at least some evidence of sympathy narratives or emotional resonance guidance. Schools did not merely identify bullying as a rule violation; they also framed it as a form of suffering that requires recognition and response. In the strongest cases, students were encouraged to imagine the victim's experience, discuss emotional consequences, and express moral discomfort toward indifference. Such framing helps transform the perception of bullying from an isolated incident into a shared ethical issue.

From a governance perspective, this moral activation matters because it reduces the psychological distance that often sustains bystander passivity. Where emotional resonance is successfully cultivated, bystanders are more likely to interpret intervention as appropriate and necessary. In this sense, compassionate concern performs an enabling function: it converts diffuse sympathy into normative attention.

4.2 Institutionalization: How Moral Emotion Becomes a School-Level Informal Institution

The cases further show that compassionate concern becomes consequential when it is institutionalized. In several schools, caring expectations were incorporated into class charters, discussion routines, recognition mechanisms, or recurring moral-education activities. Such arrangements created a stable normative environment in which care was not treated as private benevolence but as part of expected student conduct.

This finding suggests that moral emotion is most effective when it is socially organized. Once schools define caring behavior as expected, recognize intervention positively, and problematize indifference, students face a different normative environment. Informal institutions emerge because repeated organizational signals establish shared expectations even when teachers are not physically present.

4.3 Peer Intervention as Decentralized Governance

Across the cases, peer intervention took multiple forms, including direct intervention, indirect reporting, emotional support, and in some instances spontaneous action. The strongest cases were those in which students intervened without waiting for immediate teacher instruction, indicating that values had been internalized to some degree.

This result can be interpreted economically as a shift from centralized to decentralized governance. When peer norms support intervention, anti-bullying efforts no longer depend exclusively on teacher surveillance. Instead, part

of the regulatory function is distributed across students themselves. This reduces reliance on high-cost monitoring and increases the likelihood of timely response in low-visibility contexts.

4.4 Governance Efficiency and the Complementarity of Formal and Informal Institutions

The cases do not imply that values can replace formal rules. Rather, the evidence points to complementarity. Formal rules establish boundaries and sanction harmful conduct, while informal institutions shape everyday expectations and facilitate early intervention. Where both are present, governance becomes more robust because sanctions are backed by a supportive normative environment.

In this sense, value-guided governance may improve efficiency not by eliminating discipline, but by reducing the intensity of intervention required to maintain order. The practical advantage lies in prevention: schools can address bullying earlier, with less escalation, and with broader peer participation.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to the bullying literature by repositioning moral emotion as an institutional rather than purely psychological variable. The analysis shows that compassionate concern becomes analytically important when it is embedded in school routines, collective narratives, and symbolic recognition. It is through this organizational embedding that values acquire regulatory force.

The article also contributes to school governance research by showing that informal institutions are central to the management of behavior in environments characterized by incomplete supervision and relational complexity. Bullying prevention is not simply a matter of stronger rules; it depends on whether schools can generate shared expectations that support cooperation among students.

5.2 An Economic Interpretation of Value-Guided Anti-Bullying Governance

The economic value of this framework lies in its treatment of bullying prevention as a problem of incentives, norms, and governance costs. Bullying imposes losses on learning, classroom coordination, and long-term educational performance, yet schools cannot perfectly monitor all peer interactions. In such circumstances, formal control alone is both expensive and insufficient.

By contrast, a culture of care can be interpreted as an efficiency-enhancing informal institution. It reduces the free-rider tendency embedded in bystander situations, raises the normative payoff to intervention, and lowers the need for constant adult enforcement. Where students internalize caring obligations, schools may achieve more stable behavioral regulation with lower monitoring intensity.

This does not mean that value-guided approaches are costless or universally effective. Norm formation requires time, pedagogical investment, and organizational consistency. However, once embedded in school culture, such norms may generate cumulative returns through improved school climate, more cooperative peer relations, and lower disciplinary burden.

5.3 Cultural Contribution

A further contribution of the study is cultural. Most international discussions of care in education draw on Western moral traditions. By bringing Confucian compassionate concern into the analysis, the article shows that local ethical traditions can enrich the conceptual vocabulary of anti-bullying research. This is not merely a matter of cultural representation; it is also theoretically useful because Confucian ethics links emotional responsiveness to self-cultivation, relational duty, and social order.

As a result, compassionate concern offers a more institutionally relevant moral concept than a purely individualized account of empathy. It helps explain how schools can move from encouraging students to “feel for others” toward establishing intervention as a socially expected practice.

5.4 Policy Implications

Three policy implications follow. First, anti-bullying policy should combine formal rules with explicit norm-building measures, including class charters, empathy-based discussion routines, and peer-support structures. Second, schools should treat bystander behavior as a governance target rather than a passive background condition. Third, teacher training and school evaluation frameworks should include indicators related to care climate, peer responsibility, and the moral organization of everyday interaction.

These implications are significant because they suggest a more sustainable model of intervention. Rather than expanding surveillance indefinitely, schools can invest in value-guided mechanisms that improve decentralized cooperation and reduce enforcement dependence.

6. Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it relies on five purposively selected cases and therefore does not claim statistical generalizability. The analysis identifies a plausible mechanism, but future studies should test the proposed relationships with larger samples and mixed methods.

Second, the study is based on public textual materials. Although such materials are useful for tracing how schools narrate values and interventions, they do not directly measure students' motivations, internalization processes, or long-term behavioral change. Interview and ethnographic data would provide a richer account of how compassionate concern is enacted in practice.

Third, the article focuses on school-level governance and does not fully examine how gender, family background, or regional differences may condition the operation of compassionate concern. Future studies could investigate whether value-guided mechanisms function differently across social contexts.

Finally, while the article advances an economic interpretation of value-guided governance, it does not offer direct quantitative estimates of cost reduction or long-term educational returns. Future research could explore whether schools with stronger care cultures show lower disciplinary costs, better attendance, or improved academic performance over time.

7. Conclusion

This article has argued that school bullying prevention should be understood not only as a matter of discipline, but also as a problem of informal institutions and collective governance. Drawing on five cases from Chinese primary and secondary schools, it shows that Confucian compassionate concern can function as a value-guiding mechanism when it is translated into school culture, organizational routines, and peer expectations.

The broader implication is that moral emotions matter most when they become organizationally durable. By embedding compassionate concern in rules of interaction, symbolic recognition, and peer expectations, schools can reduce the social distance that sustains bystander passivity and improve the efficiency of anti-bullying governance. In this way, culturally grounded values can serve as low-cost complements to formal regulation and contribute to a more cooperative, preventive, and sustainable educational environment.

Acknowledgments

This work has not received any funding support.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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