ORIGINAL ARTICLE

'Big brothers and sisters have my back': Benefits and risks of befriending older peers as a strategy to deal with school bullying

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Abstract

Befriending 'brothers' and 'sisters' from older year groups was a strategy used by children to gain protection against being bullied by same-age peers at school, especially in contexts, such as Chinese rural boarding schools, where children spend a long time with peers under limited adult supervision. However, it is alarming that such close connections with older children, in some cases, could give children a feeling of having power over their same-age peers, leading them to engage in bullying. In addition, since the roles as the provider and receiver of protection could cause an unbalanced power between the older ones and younger ones, younger children might have to experience a 'dark' side of such cross-age peer relationships, such as exploitation, in some cases. Such experiences could be further strengthened by the Chinese values of 'giving' and 'gaining' in relationships. Therefore, based on an ethnographic study in a rural primary boarding school in China, this article argues that befriending older peers could contribute to increasing the safety of children at school. However, it is also necessary to be aware of potential risks associated with such peer relationships, because of the unbalanced power relation amongst children caused by age.

KEYWORDS
bullying, cross-age peer relationship, power, protection

Key Practitioner Messages
- Peers have strong power in terms of shaping children's school life.
- Cross-age friendship could contribute to children's positive school experience.
- Practitioners need to support children to build up a good understanding of the rules to deal with relationships with peers because power hierarchies commonly exist in such relationships.
- There is a risk of abusing power amongst children's peer groups in the practice of using peer power to influence children's school life.

INTRODUCTION

School bullying is a worrying issue because of its significant impact on children's wellbeing. Different approaches have been explored to reduce school bullying. As reported by many studies, there are some good practices of introducing peer support to protect children from school bullying. Tzani-Pepelasi et al. (2019) notice that peer support could cause

a positive impact on children's school experience and wellbeing by 'promoting a sense of friendship, safety, belonging, and protection' (p. 111). It was believed that strong support from peers could decrease the risk of being bullied (Huang et al., 2013). Therefore, the peer support approach has been generally praised and adopted in many schools (e.g. Chan & Wong, 2015 ; Tzani-Pepelasi et al., 2019), aiming to encourage children to be more proactive and agentic when they are being involved in or observing bullying (Cowie, 2011). There is no doubt that the peer support approach should be encouraged for its appreciation of children's agency, right to participation, and its positive impact on children's everyday life. However, some studies have looked at the potential risks that could occur when peer power is not well used by children in peer support programmes at school, especially when this programme is not regulated by well-designed training and adult support. For example, in some situations, the roles of protectors, potential victims and bullies might change in different scenarios because of the imbalanced peer power between children (Adler & Adler, 1998), such as hierarchical relationships caused by age differences (e.g. Zhang et al., 2016). Therefore, we should look at potential risks could occur when children are using peer power to negotiate their everyday lives with peers at school.

In China, an increasing number of studies explore contextualised reasons for school bullying and potential strategies that could be used to reduce school bullying. Amongst these studies, the importance of children's peer friendships has been acknowledged. For example, a connection has been built between one's friendships (e.g. number of friends, quality of friendship and friends' characteristics) and experiences of school bullying (Chen, 2010, cited by Zhang et al., 2016). Although the power of friendship and peers has been appreciated in China, a limited number of formal peer-support-based bullying prevention programmes have been introduced to Chinese schools compared with many western countries (Zhang, 2016). However, as will be discussed in this article, children are agentic (James & Prout, 2003), and can innovatively use peer power to manage their interpersonal experiences, such as gaining peer protection from friendship with older peers to protect oneself from school bullying. Therefore, with no intention of rejecting the peer support approach's contribution, this article aims to use some examples from a China-based ethnographic study about children's peer relationships in boarding school to add insights into the complexity of benefits and risks that could occur when children use one popular innovative strategy – befriending older peers at school to protect oneself from school bullying. Such discussions could also contribute to rethinking the 'taken-for-granted' positive constructions of 'friendship', which could further support us to recognise the complexity and potential 'dark' side of 'friendship', or relationships named as 'friendship' by children in specific situations.

PEER SUPPORT, CROSS-AGE FRIENDSHIP AND BULLYING PREVENTION

Although there are many definitions of bullying in the existing literature, focusing on physical aggression, social exclusion, verbal aggression and so forth, several characteristics of bullying, such as intentionality, imbalanced power, repetition (Vaillancourt et al., 2008), harm and victimisation with a consideration of both frequency and intensity (Volk et al., 2014), have been commonly highlighted. However, we still should be aware that bullying is a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon rather than homogeneous and universal. Based on a 14-country international comparative study about definitions of school bullying, Smith et al. (2002) argue that a series of factors, such as age, gender and culture, could all have an impact on children's conceptions of bullying. For example, as summarised by Vaillancourt et al. (2008), younger children tend to equate bullying with direct physical aggression, such as kicking, pushing, hitting and name calling; while older children tend to have broader conceptions of bullying, including not just physical aggression but also 'more subtle forms of abuse' (p. 487), such as exclusion and verbal aggression. In addition, the meanings of bullying and children's reactions to bullying could vary in different cultural contexts. For example, when comparing Taiwanese children's and American children's reactions to bullying, Scheithauer et al. (2016) notice that Taiwanese children showed stronger endorsement for reporting to the teacher and comforting the victim but less intention to directly tell the bully to stop. Although this article does not aim to add to or challenge commonly agreed characteristics of bullying, it will use Chinese primary school-aged children as an example to claim the importance of recognising hidden bullying. It aims to argue that bullying can have various forms and not all bullying behaviours could be easily identified by using commonly agreed characteristics because the relationships and interactions between victims and bullies could have multiple 'layers'; for example, Besag (2006) indicates that some conflicts that happen in friendship groups could be perceived as bullying.

In China, an increasing number of researchers are looking at bullying in different school contexts. As suggested by many of them, in China, the risk of experiencing school bullying and the role played by peers in bullying scenarios could be even more significant in rural boarding schools compared with other schools (Wang et al., 2022; Yang & Zhang, 2018; Yin et al., 2017). For example, in boarding schools, dormitory rooms are a significant space in which children might easily experience bullying and exploitation (Yin et al., 2017; Yue et al., 2014). Residential students need to spend a long time with peers not just away from family support (Hansen, 2015) but also under limited high-quality supervision from teachers as a result of a common shortage of teachers, especially well-educated teachers with advanced professional skills, in rural Chinese schools (Wang, 2013). This article will further contribute insights into the

understanding of bullying in Chinese rural boarding schools by using examples from an ethnographic study conducted in a rural primary boarding school in China.

When studying bullying issues in Chinese school settings, Zhang et al. (2016, p. 119) reported that age is one of the indexes that causes imbalanced power between bullies and victims: victims are always bullied by same-age or older peers. Power hierarchy caused by age differences not only exists in school bullying issues in the Chinese context. Boulton and Underwood's (1992) UK-based study suggests that younger pupils in middle school are at risk of being bullied by their older peers. In the United States context, Batsche and Knoff (1994) endorsed this idea because younger children are always physically weaker and more vulnerable than older ones. Although the risk of power hierarchy caused by age in children's peer groups is suggested in these school bullying studies, the idea of encouraging older children to look after and support younger children is still commonly appreciated in educational settings. For example, matching younger children with older peer mentors has been officially used in many schools across the world to promote a sense of community and children's positive school experiences (Roach, 2014; Tzani-Pepelasi et al., 2019). Through reviewing the outcomes of involving a peer support system to deal with school bullying in case studies from different countries, Chan and Wong (2015 , p. 105) comment that 'peer mentoring that involved older students in handling bullying incidents are found to be one of the effective methods in tackling bullying issues at school'.

Although peer-support-based school bullying prevention programmes have not been introduced into many Chinese schools yet (Zhang, 2016), it does not mean the idea of using peer support to improve children's school experiences is missing in Chinese schools. One representative example is the student leader system, a commonly used student management system in Chinese schools, which aims to promote students' self-administration and self-service in their daily school life by appointing a group of students as student leaders to support and supervise fellow students at school (Hansen, 2015). In such a context, the idea of using peer power to promote positive school life is highly valued by Chinese children (Zhu, 2021a). Therefore, despite the age segregation that might exist when children make friends at school (Montemayor & Van Komen, 1980), the idea of using peer power to protect oneself from school bullying through befriending older peers for protection could be observed in children's choices of friends at school (Yin et al., 2017). However, it is important to notice that successful peer support practices in bullying intervention are often reported as a programme that is 'coordinated at the school level by a teacher, and typically involves children and young people who volunteer to be trained in active listening, empathy, and problem-solving skills' (McElearney et al., 2008, p. 113). Some risks might occur if peer support approach is not well managed and supported by necessary training and adult support. Therefore, in the following sections, I will use several examples from a China-based study to unpack the risks of abuse of peer power and hidden bullying caused by unbalanced power in peer groups.

METHOD

This article is developed based on an ethnographic study, which was conducted in Central Primary School, in the Midwestern area of China, from February to July 2016, to explore children's understandings and experiences of peer friendships at school. Central Primary School was a rural primary boarding school, which served more than 300 students from surrounding villages. Most of its students were residential students, who stayed at school from Sunday afternoon until Friday afternoon. Boarding schools in the rural area of China often need to deal with the issues of lacking staff and poor school facilities, such as a shortage of dormitory rooms (Yin et al., 2017; Yue et al., 2014). For example, over 200 residential students in Central Primary School needed to share ten dormitory rooms during the fieldwork time. Because each dormitory room only had five to six bunk beds for around 20 students, most students needed to share a mattress with another same-sex peer. Central Primary School in total had 20 staff, including five logistical staff, but not all staff lived on campus. Each school night, only two wardens and four on-duty teachers looked after residential students. As a result of spending a long time with peers at school and sharing a crowded living space under limited adult supervision, bullying was not an unusual issue reported by many research participants. For example, *qifu* (bullying) was often mentioned by child participants in both oral-based narratives and their diaries. These research participants were Primary Year 5 students, aged from 11 to 13 years old during the fieldwork time, including 24 girls and 25 boys. The selection of these Primary Year 5 children was due to combined reasons, including children's and their parents' willingness to participate in research, class teachers' perceptions toward research and understandings of research ethics.

Because school bullying is a sensitive topic, ethics was emphasised in this project. This project gained ethical approval from the University of Edinburgh. Before entering the field, following the University of Edinburgh's ethical requirements and research setting's local procedure of child protection, an established local support network, including research gatekeepers, schoolteachers and national child protection institutions, was developed for disclosure and observation of harm in the field. In the field, informed consent was treated as an ongoing practice rather than a one-off ethics paperwork task (Gallagher, 2009a). Informed consent was initially gained from both children and their parents/grandparents through research induction and participant recruitment events during the first couple of weeks in the field.

However, since I was aware that children's right to voluntarily decide their participation in research could be undermined in highly politicised and hierarchical Chinese school contexts (Kapoor et al., 2023), I kept observing child participants' reactions (e.g. facial expression and body language) to the researcher's presence and emphasised participants' rights to withdraw before research events, such as interviews. To build up rapport and adjust the power relation with child participants in the school context, I adopted 'unusual' adult roles (Christensen, 2004) to distinguish myself from their teachers, introducing myself as 'a friendly older sister' and 'a curious learner' who enjoyed staying with children and wanted to learn from them about their friendship experiences at school.

To ensure children could choose the most suitable approaches to express themselves comfortably, multiple options were provided to them. Apart from conducting intensive ethnographic participant observation (Pink & Morgan, 2013) by immersing myself continuously and deeply in children's day-to-night school lives (e.g. I went to class, chatted, played, and ate meals with children), I also conducted formal interviews (individual or friendship-based pair; 35 children participated and each interview lasted 30 to 40 minutes) and diary exchange programme (36 children participated) with children. The diary exchange programme was designed to allow each child participant to choose to record their thoughts and questions in a notebook, shared with me confidentially when they wanted. It was designed as an alternative approach for children who did not feel comfortable having face-to-face interviews with me (see also Gallagher, 2009b). However, it is necessary to note that, compared with interviews, ensuring confidentiality in a diary exchange programme was a challenge because of insufficient privacy (e.g. no lockers) in a crowded boarding school context. For example, some children expressed their concerns that their classmates might be able to find and read their diaries when they were not paying attention. Fortunately, these agentic children suggested some creative strategies to protect the confidentiality of our diary conversations. For example, some children used very light-coloured pencils or pens to write down some experiences (e.g. conflicts with friends) to share with me so that they could erase the words or use a dark marker pen to cover up the information. So, I also followed this 'rule', using pencils and writing lightly when responding to them. Although there were different challenges to each data collection method, this study obtained rich data (e.g. ethnographic fieldnotes, child interviews, diaries and collections of school documents) because of the involvement of multiple data collection methods. Data presented in this article were analysed by using the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

During the fieldwork, the impact on data collection caused by my memory of my own childhood experiences was noticeable (Morojele, 2012; Motsa, 2017). One challenge was the difficulty of setting up a good boundary between 'remembering' and 'observing'. Researchers' observation, note-taking and data interpretation in fields are often highly subjective and emotionally charged (Kapoor et al., 2023). In this case, memories of my similar experiences of peer friendships in childhood sometimes made me worried about the risks of letting such memories and associated emotions invade my current observation and distort interpretations of observed children's emotions and interactions. Since such memories are a part of me, which I could not get rid of, in the process of dealing with such a challenge, I not only highlighted the significant importance of being reflexive (Morojele, 2012) but also tried to well use such memories as tools rather than obstacles. For example, strong emotional resonance with participants (Davison, 2004) about certain issues because of similar experiences supported me to be sensitive to certain episodes that happened in the field (Motsa, 2017). For example, I was a victim of school bullying in my childhood. In this case, school bullying was a topic that attracted my particular attention. In addition, a certain number of children in the field were troubled by their experiences of school bullying and sometimes approached me for suggestions. Honest disclosure of my own experience of being bullied at school, in many cases, promoted rich discussions between these children and me. In some conversations, several children told me that they felt more comfortable sharing their experiences of school bullying with me after knowing that I also experienced school bullying in my childhood because they thought I could understand them better and would not misjudge them.

POWER FROM 'BIG BROTHERS' AND 'BIG SISTERS'?

Because of the lack of adult supervision in Central Primary School, children were expected to engage with a high level of self-administration and self-service in their daily school life (see also Hansen, 2015; Zhu, 2021b). In such a context, peer support was encouraged. For example, to encourage the older children to look after the younger ones, Central Primary School had the tradition of running mixed-age dormitory rooms to match younger children with older children. For instance, Primary Year 6 children (around 11–12 years old), Primary Year 5 children (around 10–11 years old) and Primary Year 4 children (around 9–10 years old) need to share dormitory rooms with Primary Year 1 children (around 6–7 years old), Primary Year 2 children (around 7–8 years old) and Primary Year 3 (around 8–9 years old) children, respectively. In the field, my child participants in Primary Year 5 were placed in the same dormitory rooms with younger children in Primary Year 2. As emerged from these Primary Year 5 children's narratives about their current interactions with Primary Year 2 roommates and their memories of sharing rooms with older children when they were younger, children commonly viewed friendship with older children in the same dormitory room as a useful resource to improve their school experience. Apart from older peers' support in daily housekeeping tasks, such as making the bed,

doing laundry and tidying up, children also commonly mentioned older peers' contribution to bullying prevention. Rui, a Primary Year 5 boy, offered a detailed and typical example:

> They [older children] could protect you [younger children] at school, so nobody at your age would dare to bully you. … For example, a little one in our dormitory room reported that another two boys in his class bullied him; we went to talk to them [bullies], and it seems that they are nice to him now. (Fieldnote, 18 May 2016)

Apart from protecting children from being bullied by same-age peers, friendship with older peers was also valued because of its function of protecting children from being bullied by other older peers. For example, following the current national education policy, China has nine-year compulsory education, which normally includes six years in primary school and three years in middle school, starting when children are 6 years old. Since there is only one middle school in the town, after completing Primary Year 6, most students from Central Primary School will move to that middle school for another three years of compulsory education. Worries about new life in middle school were a common topic discussed amongst Primary Year 5 children in the field. One worry was about being bullied by older peers in middle school. But a few children, including both boys and girls, were confident about the future peer protection that they could gain from their older friends in middle school. These older friends in most cases were referred to as 'big brothers' and 'big sisters'. For example, one Primary Year 5 boy, Yiming, spoke proudly of the benefits of befriending a 'big brother' as follows:

> I heard from some other people who had just entered middle school that the boys in the higher years of middle school would bully the younger boys. But I'm not worried about the bullying issue after I move to middle school. After I move to middle school, my 'big brother' would be in the third year of middle school, the oldest in the school, and could protect me from being bullied. (Interview, 14 June 2016)

As explained by Yiming and other children in follow-up conversations, being *zijiren* (insiders/in-group members) is key in the process of seeking protection from older peers. When these Primary Year 5 children start middle school, their relationships with these 'big brothers' and 'big sisters' could give them access to join these older friends' established informal groups or networks (*xiao tuanti*) at school as *zijiren* to gain protection. Since Chinese relationships (*guanxi*) emphasise the moral obligation and interpersonal responsibilities to other in-group members (Gummerum & Keller, 2008), as *zijiren* of a group, older peers from the same group would feel moral obligations to look after them (see also Zhu, 2021b). Furthermore, as explained by Yiming and other boys, there is a social rule between groups: people from different groups often tend to 'give "face" (*gei mian zi*) to each other by being respectful in interactions to maintain harmonious relationships between different groups'. Therefore, because of this social rule, they believed that older peers from other groups might not bully them as well in most cases. Even in some situations where some individual in-group members are bullied by people from other groups, peers from the same group would intervene to provide protection. In this case, these children believed that they should have a reduced risk of being bullied by others in middle school.

However, it was alarming that some 'big brothers' mentioned by Yiming and other boys seemed to share characteristics of being aggressive; for example, 'no one dares to mess with him' and 'very good at fighting' were used to describe these 'big brothers' who could protect them. Although the benefits of befriending older peers are prominent as suggested by the above examples, there is a concern that children who join informal groups (*xiao tuanti*) to gain protection might be at risk of being eventually involved in aggressive behaviours (e.g. flighting). Although informal groups (*xiao tuanti*) could play a significant role in children's socialisation, they are often discouraged in Chinese schools because it is constructed as a threat to the collective leading to inharmonious in-clique and out-clique conflict (Xu et al., 2004). For example, as mentioned above, groups will intervene if an individual in-group member conflicts with people from other groups. In addition, since peer pressure commonly exists in groups, there is a common concern about peers' impact on affecting and directing children's social behaviours (e.g. antisocial behaviours) (Chen et al., 2001). Considering the above-mentioned aggressive characteristics of some 'big brothers', peer impact on these Primary Year 5 boys in groups with these 'big brothers' could be uncertain.

Similar concerns caused by children's choices of protectors also emerge from other examples of 'big sisters'. A Primary Year 5 girl, Fan, recalled having been bullied by Wenjun, another Primary Year 5 girl, when they were in Primary Year 3. According to Fan, Wenjun had a 'big sister' in Primary Year 6 at that time. Wenjun's 'big sister', like some 'big brothers' mentioned by Yiming and other boys, also had a reputation as a 'tough girl and nobody dares to bother her'. Therefore, Wenjun was domineering towards other Primary Year 3 girls, threatening to ask her 'big sister' to make trouble for them if they annoyed her. During that period, Fan shared the same mattress with Wenjun in the first semester of Primary Year 3. Fan said Wenjun always annoyed her in the evening, demanding Fan tell her stories before

they went to sleep. If Fan refused, Wenjun would threaten her, saying: 'I will ask my sister in Primary Year 6 to cause you trouble'. To please Wenjun and avoid trouble, Fan, therefore, decided to pretend to befriend Wenjun by agreeing to play the games the latter proposed, sharing snacks with her, and giving her popular items, such as princess stickers, as gifts. According to Fan, for quite a long time, she did not feel free to refuse Wenjun's requests for fear of being bullied by her and potentially her 'big sister'. Apart from Wenjun-Fan's example, some in-field conversations with children also suggested that such abuse of power and bullying behaviours were ongoing issues amongst children. For example, Taozi, a Primary Year 5 girl, has some older friends as disclosed by herself in chats and noticed in observations (e.g., close interactions with Primary Year 6 children, older visitors from local middle school, frequent mention of older friends in conversations with classmates). Her connection with older peers made her powerful and influential in her class. Therefore, Taozi seemed to be popular (e.g. always being surrounded by peers) and was nominated as a 'friend' by quite a few children. However, in some conversations, some hidden bullying behaviours in Taozi's friendship groups were noticed. For example, I was involved in one conversation with some of Taozi's friends about the consequences when she got mad at them:

> These girls commonly said 'Taozi is bossy' and highlighted negative (and worrying – I think it is bullying) consequences when Taozi got mad at them. … Duan said if Taozi got mad at her, she would require all other girls not to play with her and speak ill of her. Xiaoyue said Taozi would ask them to return all the gifts she sent to them since Primary Year one!! … (Fieldnote, 7 April 2016)

As reported by a few children and suggested in the above examples, in some cases, close relationships with older peers could hurt children's relationships with same-age peers. Close connections with older children could give younger ones a feeling of having power over their same-age peers, leading them to engage in bullying themselves, as bullies, within their same-age groups in some cases. Such a situation could be prominent when the older peers have 'scary' reputations at school, such as 'fierce', 'tough, powerful, and have a lot of fellows', and 'nobody dares to bother them'. Therefore, although some children might decide to befriend older peers to protect themselves from becoming bullying victims at the beginning, they somehow might take advantage of their relationships with older peers in their interactions with other peers and become bullies.

KINDNESS WITH CONDITIONS? PAYBACKS FOR PROTECTION PROVIDED BY OLDER FRIENDS

Although children seem to be able to gain power from their connection with older friends, there is another concern about the risk of exploitation experienced by younger children in cross-age friendships because of power hierarchy. As mentioned by children in the field, most of them built up relationships with their 'big brothers' and 'big sisters' during the time of sharing dormitory rooms with them when they were younger. In their narratives of the experiences of befriending and maintaining relationships with these older friends, a risk of being exploited because of power hierarchy caused by age difference was prominent. In the process of establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships (*guanxi*) in China, the rule of giving and returning favours is highly valued (Qi, 2013) because it regulates 'social, political and business exchanges and can function as emotional and instrumental resources in the sense of debt and pay return' (p. 314). Therefore, a failure to provide paybacks to assisting person would cause damage to the stability of a relationship (*guanxi*). As children who grow up in Chinese society, the rule of giving and returning favours was followed by these Primary Year 5 children in their daily interpersonal interactions with their peers (see also Zhu, 2021a). To provide paybacks for the protection offered by 'big brothers' and 'big sisters', some children needed to do favours for these older peers. However, in some situations, such favours might undermine their own interests.

As mentioned in many children's narratives, younger children in the dormitory rooms were always asked to stay awake to guard older children's 'secret play' after lights-out, which mostly consisted of 'hide and seek' and telling ghost stories. Because of the limited free playtime in their tightly regulated boarding school timetable (Hansen, 2015) and children's excitement of challenging adults' authority (Corsaro, 2015), many children were keen to find different ways to 'create' time to play. Since children were not allowed to talk and play after lights-out, such 'secret play' overstepped school rules. After lights-out, wardens and on-duty teachers had several rounds of patrolling in the dormitory building. Children who overstepped school rules would be recorded by patrolling teachers as rulebreakers. Consequently, following the school's points-earning/ranking system, points would be deducted from both these misbehaving children's individual accounts and their classes' collective accounts (Zhu, 2021a). Such deduction of points would annoy these misbehaving children's class teachers and classmates because their individual behaviours undermined class's collective performance. Therefore, these misbehaving children were often criticised by teachers and at risk of being categorised as 'troublemakers' and socially excluded by classmates. Because being criticised by teachers is commonly viewed as a very

stressful and shameful experience at school (e.g. losing 'face' in front of peers) in China (Schoenhals, 2016), children were always very careful and used different approaches to avoid being caught by teachers when they did 'secret play'. Asking younger children to be the 'guards' was one applied strategy. However, younger children needed to take risks when guarding older children's 'secret play' in dormitory rooms at night. For example:

> Sometimes the little ones were wrongly accused by the duty teachers because the teachers heard them when they spoke loudly to warn us teachers were coming ... (Fieldnote, 18 May 2016)

Similar descriptions of the risks taken by younger children when guarding older ones' 'secret play' were mentioned by many Primary Year 5 children when talking about their current interactions with younger roommates and recalling their own memories of living with older children. In such narratives, they commonly adopted a careless and joking tone, which might suggest that they took younger children's guard 'duty' for granted because they did the same 'favours' for older peers when they were the younger ones. Although I did not have access to talk with the younger children mentioned by my participants in the field to directly explore their feelings toward the request of guarding older children's play at night, it might be surmised that these younger children were probably under significant stress because of the negative consequences of being accused as rulebreakers in a school context that was fulfilled by the norms of 'collective good', 'shame' and 'face' (Schoenhals, 2016) and managed by the points-earning/ranking system (Zhu, 2021a).

Although no squabble was particularly mentioned by children in their narratives about doing favours for older peers, observations of some mild conflicts (e.g. younger ones' complaints were dismissed by the older ones impatiently) between Primary Year 5 children and their younger fellows were noticed in the field. As suggested by Zhang et al. (2016) the unbalanced power between victims and bullies is one distinct feature of *qifu* (bullying) in the Chinese context. Therefore, because of the power hierarchy caused by age, the boundary between 'doing a favour' and exploitation/ bullying could be blurred in some situations because these younger children might not feel free to refuse their older peers' requests. Furthermore, the above-discussed examples also suggest a question: to what extent could such relationships be categorised as 'friendship'? Although friendship could be defined in various ways because of the complexity of its patterns and involved aspects (e.g. emotional attachment and instrumental usefulness), the necessity of paybacks and stress felt by younger children when returning favours to older 'friends' could be a warning sign. Indeed, reciprocity, such as exchanging favours mutually, plays an important role in positive and intimate friendships, because it could contribute to a sense of justice, solidarity and affection (Greco et al., 2015). But it is necessary to ensure this relationship is voluntary and pleasant between equals with the same power status (Allan & Adams, 2007) in the process of achieving reciprocity. Otherwise, because of the missing equality and justice, the ones with less power in so-called 'friendships' might be exposed to exploitation in the process of returning favours (see also Zhu, 2021b). In addition, although it might be a result of limited data from a single ethnographic case study, very few children talked about the emotional commitment between themselves and their 'big brothers' and 'big sisters'. Therefore, it seems that such cross-age friendships are largely instrumental-oriented with a strong emphasis on friends' usefulness to benefit individuals' personal school experiences but no significant affective basis. In this case, although children involved in the above-discussed examples described such relationships as 'friendship', this classification might be challenged and might need to give way to other instrumental-oriented relationships, such as contractual alliance or patron–client tie (see also Wolf, 1966).

CONCLUSION

In sum, children's agentic approach to befriending older peers could be viewed as their initial strategy to 'survive' at school. For example, they expect to use such cross-age relationships to gain support and protection from older peers. Indeed, older peers' power of protecting younger children from school bullying demonstrates the peer support approach's good potential to be used to improve children's school experiences. However, this article warns of both the risk of being exploited in cross-age friendships caused by imbalanced power and potential power abuse and bullying within same-age peer groups promoted by some children's close relationships with older peers. Also, the definition of friendship is highly contextualised (Allan & Adams, 2007). Therefore, although children might use some older peers 'friends', 'big brothers', and 'big sisters', it is necessary to reflect on the complexity of friendships and the potential 'dark' side of some so-called 'friendships', such as hidden bullying, because it could be disguised by taken-for-granted positive constructions of 'friendship'. Again, this article does not mean to reject the peer support approach's contribution but to highlight potential risks caused by unbalanced power in cross-age peer relationships. It reiterates the importance of providing children with good support in practice based on an understanding of the potential risks associated with their initial attempts to use peer power, especially in cross-age peer groups, to deal with school bullying issues.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

This work is original and the authors' own work, that it has not been published or submitted elsewhere. There are no conflicts of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This article is developed based on a project, which received ethical approval from the University of Edinburgh, UK.

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