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CASE REPORT

An Ecosystemic Autopsy of School Bullying and Adolescent Suicide: Multi-Level Analysis and Reform Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

This research conducted an ecosystemic autopsy on a tragic incident of school bullying and the suicide of a female teenager from Jinjiang, China. Such post-crisis analysis examined the deeper, structural, and systemic factors that contributed to the tragedy, rather than merely the immediate, surface-level causes. Multiple ecosystemic levels, involving the family, school, peers, government authorities, socio-cultural environment, and developmental changes, were identified to collectively impact the psychological well-being of the adolescent and ultimately increase the risk of suicide. The possible limited parents' sensitivity and responsiveness towards the child's emotions, teachers' insufficient socio-emotional and mental-health support capacity, and lack of clear rules and policies in educational departments were all contributing factors. Additionally, the socio-cultural expectations or norms surrounding self-reliance and emotional repression, as well as the complex challenges of early adolescence, further contributed to the student's susceptibility. These findings highlight that the crisis should not be considered as an individual responsibility, but rather systemic breakdowns at various ecosystems often cascade to generate the tragic outcome. That also underscores the need for ecosystemic reforms and coordination to prevent or intervene in the future recurrence. Recommendations include psychoeducation and specialized training for parents and teachers, regular screening, assessment, and monitoring of students' social and emotional well-being in schools, provision of confidential and stigma-free crisis support channels, as well as the establishment of clear, operationalized anti-bullying policies. However, it is worth noting that the limited data available in the public domain can constrain the depth and effectiveness of the present analysis. Therefore, this study also appeals to the relevant authorities to consider releasing more detailed information regarding this important incident, in order to promote further insights into its underlying causes and preventative measures.

Keywords*: ecosystemic autopsy, school bullying, suicide, ecological systems theory*

1. INTRODUCTION

The term “autopsy” comes from the medical and forensic sciences, where it typically refers to the postmortem medical examination of a body to identify the cause of death. For example, in the 1950s, researchers first brought up the term psychological autopsy (PsychoA), which is a process used to reconstruct the individual’s mental state, personality, and social circumstances underlying a suicide or equivocal death [1]. Although PsychoA has offered valuable perspectives on individual-level factors, it pays significantly less attention to the social, institutional, and cultural circumstances that might affect a person’s experiences and vulnerabilities.

In response to this limitation, Chia [2] proposed the concept of ecosystemic autopsy (EcoA), drawing on Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (EST) [3], to better account for the multifaceted contributors to complex crises. This theory posits that human development occurs not in isolation but in the ongoing interactions between the individual and his/her environment [4]. Bronfenbrenner categorized the developmental environment into five interrelated and nested systems, and they together constitute a single ecological system in which each person lives. As shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, they include not only the immediate environmental settings in which individuals participate (e.g., family and school), but also broader sociocultural structures and temporal dimensions, and each could directly or indirectly affect an individual’s behavior and psychological state.

Table 1: Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological System Layers

System	Definition	Example
Microsystem	The immediate environments in which an individual actively participates, such as family, school, peer groups, and neighborhood. Interactions within the microsystem are the most direct and influential.	Parenting style, teacher feedback, or peer relationships.
Mesosystem	The interconnections between two or more microsystems, such as the relationship between family and school. The quality of these linkages affects an individual’s adaptation and development.	Collaboration or communication between parents and teachers.
Exosystem	The broader social settings that do not directly involve the individual but indirectly affect their experiences.	Parents’ workplace conditions, community services, media exposure, or school administration policies.
Macrosystem	The broadest layer of an individual’s environment, encompassing overarching cultural, societal, and institutional influences. This layer shapes the general developmental climate within which individuals grow.	Social values, legal systems, economic structures, educational policies, religious beliefs, and gender norms.
Chronosystem	The temporal dimension that captures changes and transitions over time, both within the individual’s life course and within the larger sociohistorical context.	Parental divorce, moving to a new city or school, or experiencing societal events such as a pandemic or economic crisis.

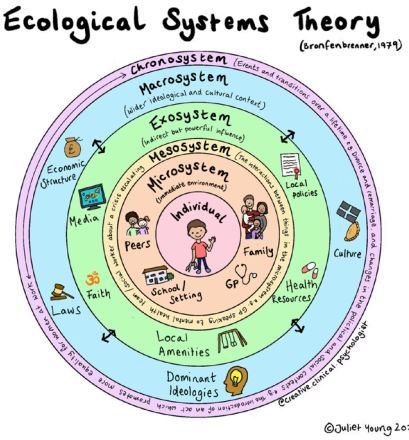


Figure 1. An illustration of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory [5].

1.1 What is Ecological Systems Theory?

The ecological system is best conceptualized as a living, dynamic process rather than a static or structural entity [6]. People are not passive recipients of the external environment, but active factors who consistently shape and are shaped by their surroundings [4]. For example, when a student experience bullying, he/she may respond by seeking support from friends, reporting incidents to a teacher, or trying to assert themselves in social interactions. While responses from teachers, peers, and the school's policies can influence a student's safety and mental well-being, the student's own choices or actions can also affect the reactions of the perpetrator and the general class climate. Moreover, the dynamics also lies in different layers of an ecosystem as they continuously interact with, depend on, and influence each other. The issue of a new educational policy that restricts class size (macrosystem) requires schools (exosystem) to adjust their staffing and classroom allocation accordingly. The small-class setting will allow the teachers (microsystem) to devote more attention to each student, more effectively detect students' learning and emotional struggles, and provide more immediate and tailored feedback. Such positive attention and support can strengthen the teacher-student relationship, increasing students' confidence and participation level in school activities. At the same time, it also reduces the likelihood of being overlooked or isolated for more introverted and vulnerable students. Additionally, time introduces another critical dimension to the dynamics of the ecosystemic model [6]. This often involves both the developmental transitions in a person's life trajectory (e.g., moving to a new school or city, puberty) and the broader societal and historical changes (e.g., technological advancements, evolving social value systems, or public crises).

The EcoA focuses on understanding the developmental trajectory of a crisis, instead of locating its cause in a single moment of failure [2]. It considers how early conditions create vulnerabilities and how these vulnerabilities may intensify and accumulate through interactions among different ecological layers. In other words, the EcoA helps explain why a person's difficulties or distress can gradually worsen and, if unaddressed, progress toward severe or even life-threatening outcomes. Insights from such analyses emphasize the comprehensive adjustments necessary for implementing post-event remedies and reducing the likelihood of similar future incidents. In particular, when structural and regulatory reforms can be achieved, it often leads to wider and more sustained benefits than short-term relief targeted merely at the individual level. Due to these features, EcoA offers a practical approach to understanding complex, multi-causal crises, such as suicides, public health disasters, or school tragedies, where personal suffering is closely linked to systemic deficiencies.

1.2 School Bullying in China

School bullying has become a pressing public health and educational concern in China. Large-scale empirical studies and meta-analyses over the last decade have consistently found a high rate of bullying incidents in Chinese students [7,8]. A meta-analysis of 41 studies with over 600,000 students in primary and secondary schools across China, estimated a prevalence rate of 36.3% for victimization and 17.8% for perpetration [7]. According to a systematic review by Zhang and Jiang [9], 25%-40% of students reported experiencing at least one form of bullying, with physical, verbal, and relational aggression being the most common ones. In recent years, there has been a growing prevalence of relational and cyberbullying. Because these forms are covert and difficult to detect, parents and teachers often neglect or fail to take them seriously despite serious mental health consequences such as depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicidal behaviors [8,10]. Moreover, gender differences are also observed in bullying. Girls has been found to be more likely to experience relational aggression while direct verbal or physical verbal aggression are commonly conducted by boys [11]. Female students are also be more vulnerable to develop depressive symptoms in response to victimization [12].

Several risk factors for bullying have been identified in the current literature. Students who live in rural areas and economically disadvantaged regions are shown to be particularly vulnerable [13]. Schools in these areas usually have minimal psycho-educational resources, extracurricular activities and mental health support. Students might therefore be less appropriately equipped with systematic supervision, supporting relationships, and healthy coping methods for stress, which permits small frustrations and conflicts to build up. Without teachers who can identify problems early or provide timely and effective intervention, small conflicts may persist, intensify, and gradually develop into forms of peer aggression. Research also shows that students from ethnic minority counties of China experienced greater social marginalization and exclusion than those from the majority group [14]. Under such conditions, these students may become more visible targets for teasing, discrimination, or bullying because social exclusion limits their access to supportive peer networks and reduces opportunities for positive social interactions. Left-behind children is another population that has been identified as a high-risk group for bullying [15]. Due to the lack of regular parental support and supervision, these children tend to be seen as easy targets, and they also show lower confidence and fewer help-seeking behaviors once being victimized. In addition, negative school climates, authoritarian teacher–student relationships and hostile peer relationships can also contribute to the occurrence of bullying events [9].

Bullying can exert profound and long-lasting impacts on students' mental, behavioral, and academic functioning [16]. It has been associated with a heightened risk of anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, and social withdrawal [17]. In a school-based study in Zhejiang Province, China, researchers found that students who experienced bullying were more likely to report suicidal thoughts or attempts [18]. And this result remains significant even after controlling for variables such as gender, socioeconomic status, and mental health. Although the specific mechanisms underlying the link between bullying experiences and suicidal thoughts or behaviors have yet to be fully established, convergent findings suggest that bullying victimization is a significant psychosocial stressor that increases suicidal risk among Chinese youths. Overall, school bullying is a widespread, multifaceted incident that can seriously threaten students' well-being and, in extreme cases, their lives. This underscores the need for comprehensive approaches such as the EcoA to uncover the multilevel factors contributing to the crisis and inform proactive, system-level measures for prevention and intervention. To address this gap, the current study performed an EcoA of the suicide of a junior high school student in Jinjiang, China (March 2024), a case suspected to involve school bullying. Through this case-based investigation, the study aimed to reveal the systemic failures underlying the suicide and and to provide insights on targeted preventative measures for both bullying and suicide events.

2. CASE STUDY

2.1 Background Information

LH (a pseudonym), a 13-year-old first-year student at Lingshui Middle School in Jinjiang City, Quanzhou, Fujian Province, died after falling from her off-campus rented apartment on the night of March 24, 2024. She was found at around 10 p.m. and was later pronounced dead despite emergency medical treatment [19].

According to reports, LH had dinner with her mother earlier that evening and returned to the apartment alone at around 7 p.m. Several hours later, she sent her mother a WeChat message expressing despair and referring to bullying she had experienced in the days before her death: "*My life is coming to an end. I can't stay in Lingshui any longer… Those who bullied me are still living so happily… I'll still be your daughter in my next life.*" (The quotes are translated directly from the original Chinese message.) Her mother replied asking for LH's location but received no further response. She went to look for her daughter immediately. Upon arriving at the apartment, she found LH unresponsive and rushed her to the hospital, where resuscitation efforts were unsuccessful.

The incident rapidly attracted public attention via social and news media. The next morning, the victim's family came to the school to request explanations for the tragedy and bullying concerns raised prior to LH's death. On March 26, the Jinjiang Municipal Education Bureau issued an official statement confirming the student's death and announcing the establishment of an investigation team, formed jointly with public security and other relevant departments, to carry out inquiries and handle subsequent matters. According to the most recent publicly available information, no official determinations, disciplinary actions, or legal proceedings have been disclosed. As this crisis spans several systems, such as peer interactions, school and institutional responses, and communication between school and family, it makes for a valuable case for a potential EcoA study to reveal the underlying systemic failures and responsibility gaps involved.

2.2 Chronological Timeline of the Event

To provide a clear overview of the incident's progression, a chronological timeline of key events related to the case is formulated based on publicly available sources, such as media reports, interviews with the victim's family, and official statements from local education authorities (see Table 2). Given the limitations of publicly accessible information, some details remain incomplete or unverified, and the timeline should be viewed as a reconstruction based on the evidence currently available.

Table 2: Jinjiang Lingshui Middle School Incident Timeline

Date	What Happened (Factual Statement)	Source Type
2024-03-02 / 03-09 / 03-10	Records from the victim's phone show that she transferred 350 CNY, 100 CNY, and 450 CNY on March 2, March 9, and March 10 respectively to a peer. The mother discovered these records when checking the phone afterward and suspected coercion.	This information was obtained from interviews conducted by The Beijing News [19] (新京报) with the victim's mother, which were subsequently cited and republished by several major Chinese media outlets, including The Paper [20] (澎湃新闻), Sohu News [21] (搜狐新闻), NetEase News (网易新闻), CCTV News [22] (央视网), Sina Education [23] (新浪教育), etc.
2024-03-24 (Sunday) Evening (~19:00 hour)	On that evening, the mother had a hotpot for dinner with her daughter. Around 19:00, the girl returned to her rented apartment alone.	—
2024-03-24 (~22:00 hour)	Around 21:24 hour, the victim sent a WeChat message to her mother: "*Mom, my life is coming to an end. I can't stay in Lingshui any longer. Those who bullied me are still living so happily, and I feel so miserable. I have to see them every day at school. Please wash the clothes on my bed and send them to XXX (one of LH's classmate). [A smiling face emoji] Mom, I'll still be your daughter in my next life.*" This passage is a direct translation of the original message sent by the victim to her mother. The mother immediately tried to contact her daughter but received no reply. Around 22:00 hour, the mother arrived at the apartment building and found her daughter unresponsive, rushed her to the hospital, but resuscitation was unsuccessful.	Reported by The Beijing News [19] and subsequently cited by major Chinese media outlets.
2024-03-25	After the incident, videos, audio recordings, and images circulated on social media and short-video platforms (e.g., TikTok). The sources of these materials are unknown, possibly filmed by local residents, and the publishing sequence was irregular, but they reflected key aspects of the scene: • Footage shows the victim's family and friends trying to enter the school building, blocked by school security, with some verbal and physical confrontations. • Images show banners at the school gate stating: "*The child has long suffered bullying at Lingshui*	Likely filmed by civilians (non-official / non-journalist sources) and circulated on social media. Mainstream media did not formally report these visuals.

	Middle School, teachers knew but did not report it, a 13-year-old girl's life was taken away, give me back my child!" • Other posters at the school gate read: "*Tragically bullied by classmates!!! Forced my daughter to death!!! Lingshui Middle School, return my 13-year-old daughter's life!!!*" These videos and images spread widely on social media, drawing public attention and discussion.	
2024-03-26	Jinjiang Education Bureau issued an official statement: confirming that around 22:00 hour on March 24, 2024, a junior high school student, named, Li X fan (with the middle character omitted), fell from her rented apartment and died despite resuscitation. The statement further noted that a special task force had been established in cooperation with the police to conduct an investigation and manage follow-up work, which was ongoing at the time of the announcement.	Official statement from the Fujian Provincial Department of Education [24] official website and WeChat public account ("Fujian Education").
2024-03-26 to 03-27	The mother was interviewed by the media, revealing additional details: the daughter was an only child, cheerful, liked basketball and badminton, in the first year of junior high at Lingshui Middle School, and a boarding student returning home every Friday and back to school on Monday. On the day of the incident, mother and daughter had dinner together (hotpot); the mother reported no noticeable abnormal behavior before the event. Several hours later, she received the daughter's WeChat farewell message. After checking the phone, the mother found multiple transfers to classmates, suggesting long-term bullying.	The information was obtained from interviews conducted by The Beijing News [19] (新京报) with the victim's mother, subsequently cited by several major Chinese media outlets, including The Paper [20], Sohu News [21], NetEase News, CCTV News [22], Sina Education [23], etc.
2024-03-26	Fujian Provincial Department of Education [24] held a video conference for safety work in all primary and secondary schools, re-mobilizing, re-deploying, and promoting anti-bullying measures. The conference required local education authorities to conduct a comprehensive inspection of all schools regarding campus violence and bullying prevention. The previous incident had triggered widespread public attention and protests online.	Official statement from the Fujian Provincial Department of Education [24] official website and WeChat public account ("Fujian Education").
2024-03-26 – Present	Official public information remains at the stage of "task force established, investigation ongoing." Searches of official notices, mainstream media, and social media platforms found no public disclosure of final investigation results or specific disciplinary/judicial actions.	Publicly available sources (official notices, mainstream media, social media, portal websites, etc.) indicate that no final investigation conclusions or disciplinary/judicial announcements have been released.

From Table 2, several key moments draw attention, including the repeated financial transfers before the incident, the victim's farewell message to her mother, and the subsequent responses from her family, the school, and local authorities. These hint potential breakdowns across multiple ecological levels: the microsystem (family and school interactions), the mesosystem (coordination and communication between family and school), and the exosystem (institutional oversight and response). As such, the timeline provides a basis for a deeper systemic analysis using the Ecosystemic Autopsy framework.

2.3 Ecosystemic Autopsy

2.3.1 Microsystem

Family

According to attachment theory [25], parents play two essential roles in supporting children's development and well-being. First, they should serve as a "secure base" from which the child can

explore the world. That requires parent to provide a stable sense of trust and emotional support so that the child can confidently attempt, express, and seek help when facing challenges in learning, relationships, or the environment. Second, they should function as a “safe haven” in times of danger, trauma, or intense emotional distress by offering immediate comfort, understanding, and practical assistance (e.g., contacting the school, filing a complaint, or seeking professional help). In the present case, however, whether due to external barriers or the underlying issues in parent-child dynamics, these core family functions appear not to have not been effectively fulfilled.

LH attended a boarding middle school, living on campus from Monday to Friday. In many Chinese secondary schools, students are typically not allowed to bring mobile phones or any electronic devices. This means that for five days each week, LH had almost no face-to-face interaction with her parents and rarely engaged in other forms of communication, such as text messages, voice or video calls. Daily emotional disclosure and trivial grievances can be largely suppressed by these restrictions. For parents, the lack of daily contact directly undermines their ability to perceive the child’s mental state. Without regular communication and observation, parents cannot easily detect subtle emotional fluctuations in tone, expression, or wording, nor can they offer comfort or intervene early when problems first arise. Over time, emotional distress often accumulates gradually at school while remains “muted” on the parental side. And by the time any overt abnormalities can be detected, the problems frequently progressed to a stage that irreversible or crisis-level outcomes have emerged and meaningful intervention is impossible. Meanwhile, for the child, boarding life means losing a “low-threshold channel” for emotional feedback and help-seeking. Such delays can easily lead her to believe that seeking help is ineffective. Over time, her willingness to express needs may diminish, resulting in further emotional suppression and social withdrawal. More notably, even during weekends when she reunited with her parents, LH still did not choose to disclose the long-term humiliation and money transfer she had been enduring. In media interviews, her parents described her as “cheerful, lively, and fond of laughter,” without anything unusual noticed. Yet this sharply contrasts with the deep torment, despair, and disgust expressed in her final message. LH’s reluctance to share her suffering and emotional breakdown might suggests that, from her perspective, the family may not have fully become a reliable “secure base” or “safe haven.”

Several complex psychological mechanisms may help explain this silence. The first possible factor is related to impaired attachment and a diminished sense of security. Attachment theory posits that the willingness to seek help when harmed largely depends on whether parents can timely and sensitively respond to their child’s needs and feelings most of the time [26]. If children repeatedly experience their needs being downplayed, ignored, or met with anxious, critical, or ineffective responses, they gradually develop a sense of insecurity and distrust towards parents, believing that “*parents cannot truly understand or help me*” and “*they cannot be relied on*” [27]. That will make children more inclined to conceal emotions and rely on her own in face of danger and distress. Secondly, LH’s silence may not merely reflect a refusal to speak, but could arise from the perception that seeking help might burden her parents. Through daily interactions, children often observe and evaluate their family circumstances, such as whether caregivers are busy with work, face financial pressures, experience emotional strain and/or have limited coping resources. Under such conditions, a child may worry that parents are unable to offer effective support and, more importantly, that disclosing personal suffering could overwhelm them and add further burdens to their already stressful lives. Consequently, children might choose to bear their distress and struggles on their own.

Finally, experiences of peer humiliation, bullying, or economic deprivation can directly threaten an individual’s sense of dignity and generate profound feelings of shame [28,29]. This is not merely simple embarrassment, rather, it can lead the child to feel “unworthy of love or protection,” and to attribute problems to personal shortcomings rather than external injustice. This self-blame drives the child to hide her vulnerability and pain, avoiding exposure of her perceived “weakness” to others. In fact, the family environment plays a crucial role in this process of emotional internalization. When the family

provides a safe and supportive environment for sharing negative experiences and emotions, children may show less shame and self-blame, and their problems are more likely to be well recognized and addressed. Conversely, a dismissive, punitive, or emotionally unavailable family tends to intensify these feelings, leaving the child feel insecure to seek comfort and trapped in a cycle of silence and despair [30].

In summary, LH's experiences of bullying might activate deep feelings of shame and self-blame. Whether the family could offer understanding and acceptance determined if these negative emotions and cognition were resolved or internalized. When the family system fails to provide emotional containment and responsive support, the child loses the most critical buffer against psychological collapse. Consequently, distress may consolidate into helplessness and despair, greatly increasing the risk of self-destructive outcomes [31,32].

Teachers

Besides the family system, the teacher is considered the most direct and accessible source of help for boarding students. When a child experiences social and emotional difficulties at school, teachers' sensitivity and responsiveness are essential not only for the early detection and identification of potential risks but also for timely intervention to prevent further deterioration. Unfortunately, as what has been observed in the family system, LH did not seek help or confide in any teacher despite enduring prolonged humiliation and alleged coerced money transfers. This silence again implies the possibilities of emotional distance and a lack of trust in the teacher–student relationship. Although no specific details have been disclosed regarding LH's interactions with teachers or the quality of these relationships, some plausible inferences can be drawn based on common patterns observed in Chinese secondary schools.

On the one hand, teachers often assume an academic-oriented role, focusing primarily on classroom discipline, behavioral management, and student achievement. However, social-emotional learning, mental health support, and interpersonal guidance for students frequently have received limited institutional attention. Thus, professional training to address students' psychological needs is insufficiently implemented. Under such context, teachers will be less attuned to early warning signs of students' emotional or social distress. Their responses to students' conflicts, bullying, or other adverse incidents tend to be reactive, which focuses on post-event "handling" or disciplinary measures, rather than proactive, which emphasizes ongoing emotional monitoring, investigation of the root causes, and preventive engagement. Moreover, this reactive pattern becomes more detrimental when teachers adopt an authoritarian approach. Authoritarian educators typically prioritize control, obedience, and maintaining order over empathy and emotional understanding [33]. Conflicts or bullying are managed through reprimands, punishment, or private persuasion with purposes of rapid restoration of classroom order. These approaches, however, tend to overlook the needs to address emotional impacts on students and the to foster appropriate relational and coping skills through education. That might unintentionally convey indifference towards students' feelings and struggles, making them less likely to trust, open up to and seek help from teachers.

On the other hand, boarding-school teachers are more prone to stress and burnout than day-school teachers, which might largely hinder their ability to function as protective and supportive figures for students. The blurred clear work–life boundaries in boarding schools require teachers to maintain prolonged availability, being responsible for not only academic instruction but also supervising evening study sessions, enforcing dormitory discipline, and managing students' daily routines. Such sustained engagement leaves less time for rest and leisure, which in turn contributes to fatigue and emotional depletion among teachers. Furthermore, these roles (as mentioned early, academic instructor, dormitory supervisor, emotional supporter, and rule enforcer) carries different and sometimes conflicting expectations. Balancing these competing demands, such as care and control, or empathy and authority,

can generate great cognitive and emotional tension. Over time, they might undermine teachers' sense of efficacy and coherence in their professional role, which again increases their vulnerability to emotional exhaustion and burnout [34]. Finally, the scarcity of mental health services for teachers, which is typical in many Chinese schools, results in a "high-demand, low-support" environment. That could accelerate the emotional breakdown or burnout of teachers.

Overall, despite being a potentially essential source of support and protection, teachers may struggle with providing timely and effective guidance due to systemic, structural, or personal shortcomings. As a result, students may not perceive teachers as a reliable "safe figure" for seeking help, which can reinforce feelings of isolation and helplessness when facing emotional or social crises.

Peers

Within the peer system, LH has experienced prolonged bullying by several peers, through reported money transfers and potentially other forms of control and aggression that have not yet been fully examined. Chronic exposure to bullying can easily damage a child's self-esteem and confidence. For instance, individuals might doubt their own value and competence, holding self-defeating beliefs such as "*I don't deserve respect*", "*I'm incapable*", "*There is nothing I can do to change my situation*" or "*No one really likes me*". These negative self-perceptions not only influence emotional well-being but also weaken learning motivation and academic performance. Researchers have found that students with a history of bullying exhibit reduced study time management and effort self-regulation, which are key cognitive-motivational skills essential for learning [35,36]. The academic struggles may further influence their self-efficacy, leading to a reinforcing cycle of low confidence, disengagement, and underachievement. These relationships can be explained by neurobiological processes. Children's brain interprets persistent social threats as physical danger, and experiences of rejection or humiliation can activate the amygdala and trigger the fight-flight response [37,38]. Through the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal system (HPA) axis, stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline are released to help the body cope with immediate danger [39]. However, when such threats persist without resolution, the stress system fails to return to a state of balance. Prolonged cortisol secretion leads to a chronic stress state, which impairs the functioning of the prefrontal cortex, the brain region governing attention, working memory, and learning efficiency [40]. Moreover, ruminative thinking, which refers to a maladaptive form of self-focused thought involving repetitive reflections on distressing events, has also been associated with the chronic stress state [41]. Instead of facilitating problem-solving, the victim might keep asking questions such as "*Why did this happen to me?*" or "*What did I do wrong?*" When comorbid with insomnia and emotional outbursts, such a condition can substantially increase the risk of self-harm or suicidal ideation [42,43].

At the social level, long-term bullying may lead children to develop overly defensive coping patterns [44,45]. One type of defensive response is avoiding expressing their true feelings or needs and become excessively compliant in peer interactions to minimize the risk of conflict or rejection. Over time, such self-suppression can weaken personal boundaries and assertiveness, which further increase the likelihood of remaining silent even in the face of unfair treatment or violations [46]. Another type is distancing oneself emotionally (appearing cold or detached) to protect against further harm [45]. The former type often elicits neglect or condescension from peers, while the latter may be misinterpreted as arrogance or unapproachability. Both conditions can place children at risk of social marginalization, which limit the opportunity for LH to obtain support or help from peers. Overall, the peer system not only became the primary source of harm but also undermined LH's social competence, making it harder for her to form new friendships. Yet during adolescence, peer relationships are supposed to serve as a crucial psychological buffer that offers emotional support and a sense of belonging.

Altogether, within the microsystem, failures across the family, teacher, and peer subsystems can significantly exacerbate feelings of isolation, helplessness, shame, and self-blame. When these

negative emotions have been left unresolved or unsupported over a long period, they may result in a deep sense of despair and increase the likelihood of turning to extreme coping behaviors such as self-harm and suicide [47].

2.3.2 Mesosystem

Within the victim's mesosystem, the interaction between the family and the school is markedly impaired. Ideally, they should operate as a united network safeguarding a child's security, development and socio-emotional health. However, in this case, trust and collaboration between them collapsed and thereby, resulted in a fragmented and ineffective support system.

On one hand, the school might completely unaware of the ongoing bullying that LH experienced on campus. That might due to a fact that many schools in China lacked a standardized procedure and training related to psychological or social risk identification. The absence of monitoring and feedback measures, such as psychological health records, daily peer-relationship logs and parent–school feedback forms, suggested that students' socio-emotional changes could not be continuously monitored. Moreover, most conversations between the school and the family focused on academic performance and disciplinary issues, with little attention given to students' holistic development, mental health, or peer dynamics. The blurred role boundaries between the family and the school further undermined collaborative efficiency. Many parents tended to assume that the school should take full responsibility for their child's safety and well-being during school hours. whereas schools often regarded psychological or interpersonal difficulties as matters of family education. The ambiguity of responsibility often leads both parties to deflect the accountability, which affects the timeliness and coherence of necessary interventions. In fact, a child's emotional, social, and cognitive development cannot be effectively supported by either system alone. Schools and families should share a common goal of supporting students' holistic well-being, while taking on differentiated yet complementary roles. positioned to conduct routine observations, identify risks, deliver psychological and social–emotional education (SEL; [48]), and provide accessible in-school mental health resources. Families, in turn, are responsible for extending care beyond school hours, establishing warm and responsive relationships, and maintaining open and supportive communication at home. When responsibilities are clearly defined and the methods of collaboration are systematically institutionalized, the mesosystem truly serve as a coherent protective system for students' development and mental health.

On the other hand, even if the school was aware of the bullying, the communication of such incidents with parents appeared to be delayed or lacked. According to some short video clips circulating on social media, LH's family protested at the school gate with banners and posters, alleging accusing the school of concealing the bullying events. Although these claims have not been officially verified, they nonetheless reflect public mistrust toward the school's transparency, crisis management, and accountability. Withholding information could impede early intervention and leave emotional distress and interpersonal conflicts of students to escalate. Moreover, avoidance of communication or responsibility can also shape the broader institutional climate. When institutional regulations, operational procedures, and accountability structures are unclear, individuals may become uncertain about which actions are appropriate or safe. In such ambiguous conditions, remaining silent might be a less risky option, as speaking up could expose teachers to complaints or conflicts from parents, to criticism or pressure from school administrators, or even to administrative sanctions. When this pattern of individual avoidance becomes widespread, it can foster a systemic culture of silence, allowing bullying or other adverse events to be contiguously neglected at the collective level.

Overall, the gaps in information collection and transmission, the ambiguity of role boundaries, and the collapse of trust jointly eliminated the protective collaboration between family and school. Consequently, not only did individual risk escalate, but the overall psychosocial climate of the school community might also be influenced.

2.3.3 Exosystem

In June 2018, the Fujian Provincial Department of Education [24] issued the “Comprehensive Governance Plan for the Prevention and Control of Bullying among Primary and Secondary School Students”. While this document emphasized the need to “improve rules and regulations” and “establish a comprehensive system for the prevention of school bullying”, it fails to specify actionable procedures for implementation. In other words, it only tells schools what objectives they should pursue but provides no guidance on how to achieve them. Since the guideline remains at a macro and conceptual level, it may result in superficial or merely symbolic compliance.

This document did not clarify concrete procedures for addressing bullying incidents. For example, who should conduct the investigation, how the victims should be protected, when and how parents should be informed, whether cases should be reported to education authorities, or who should provide psychological intervention are all essential components that requires clear explanation. It also failed to establish differentiated standards for responding to various types of bullying (e.g., verbal insults, physical aggression, social exclusion and cyberbullying). For post-incident protocol, details involving timelines for case handling, procedures for psychological counseling, and whether third-party professionals should be engaged should also be clarified. Moreover, although the document emphasized the need for regular inspections of teacher–student and peer conflicts, it did not specify the required frequency or the format in which these inspections should be conducted (e.g., one-on-one interviews, anonymous student surveys, or structured psychological documentation). The lack of concrete protocols may result in conducting perfunctory or merely procedural checks and addressing issues in a less effective manner.

In terms of responsibility division, although the published policy identified schools as the “primary entities responsible for bullying prevention,” it failed to failed to clarify how responsibilities should be allocated across different administrative levels (e.g., head teachers, moral education offices, school counseling centers, senior management, and higher-level education authorities). During severe incidents, unclear leadership often led staff to pass responsibility among themselves or wait for others to intervene. That will significantly weaken the school’s role as the immediate protector of students. Meanwhile, the educational administration system has yet to establish an feasible accountability mechanism with legal authority. Although the policy document calls for the enforcement of “strict accountability and supervision” regarding bullying incidents, it provides limited information on the circumstances under which “dereliction of duty” or “misconduct” would constitute a violation. Furthermore, the current policy also fails to consider independent oversight group to objectively examine how schools fulfill their responsibilities in handling such incidents. This helps ensure more transparent, impartial, and effective efforts to support students’ safety and well-being.

In summary, LH’s case highlighted several structural deficiencies at the government level. The lack of actionable procedures and unclear division of responsibilities can largely undermine the effectiveness of policy implementation at the exosystem level.

2.3.4 Macrosystem

At the macrosystem level, societal culture and values shape the environment in which students and schools’ function, and this could indirectly influence how children respond to bullying. In Chinese society, a strong emphasis on academic achievement and behavioral conformity often leads schools, teachers, and parents to prioritize grades and discipline over students’ emotional well-being. [49,50]. Thus, when bullying occurs, students may consider that their suffering won’t be taken seriously and that schools or parents won’t be able to provide adequate support. Over time, this environment can reinforce feelings of helplessness, as children avoid seeking any help from adults. Traditional cultural expectations further

compound this effect. Children are often socialized to be “strong” and “self-reliant”, and to avoid “bothering others” with personal issues [51,52]. This cultural backdrop encourages children to conceal experiences of bullying or psychological distress to avoid imposing burdens on others. In the present case, the fact that LH did not disclose her prolonged bullying to parents (even during brief weekend visits home) and teachers seems to illustrate the potential influence of these cultural pressures.

Moreover, Chinese culture also pay significant emphasis on self-esteem and “face”, meaning that people are reluctant to disclose experiences that could lead to embarrassment or being looked down upon by others [53]. Within this cultural context, children tend to learn from an early age to suppress negative emotions and maintain a positive appearance in front of others. Such social expectation could heighten children’s sensitivities to shame. This is especially pronounced during adolescence, a period when individuals are developing their sense of self and are highly attentive to their image among peers and society [54]. Thus, they are more likely to react strongly to situations that may threaten their “face” or self-esteem. Experiences of bullying not only cause pain and fear but can also lead adolescents to doubt their own worth, feeling “unworthy of respect” or “not good enough.” As such feeling of shame accumulate, children often become inclined to remain silent about negative experiences, in an attempt to avoid further loss of dignity or social recognition.

2.3.5 Chronosystem

From the chronosystem perspective, LH was in early adolescence and undergoing the critical transition from primary to middle school, a period marked by great changes and challenges. Previous peer networks and social supports gained in LH’s primary school were disrupted, and the boarding school environment limited daily interactions with family. As a result, LH lacked a stable and reliable support system. In the middle school, LH needs to learn and adapt to entirely new social rules, power dynamics, and heightened academic demands. For individuals in early adolescence, this process is particularly challenging. On the other hand, early adolescence (approximately ages 11–14) represents a critical period in psychosocial development, which Erik Erikson [55] identified as the “identity vs. role confusion” stage. During this period, adolescents begin exploring questions such as “*Who am I?*”, “*How do others see me?*” and “*Where do I belong?*”. Their self-concept gradually shifts from being primarily shaped by the family to being increasingly influenced by peers and social evaluation. Experiences of social conflict, exclusion, or humiliation can cause individuals to doubt or deny their own value. Research has shown that the persistence of low self-worth, accompanied by the perception that one’s situation cannot be changed, results in the increased sense of despair and, in turn, elevates the risk of suicidal ideation [56]. In summary, a chronosystem-level perspective highlights how the interplay of neurodevelopmental immaturity, environmental transitions and impaired self-image accumulated over time to undermine the child’s resilience in face of crisis events.

3. MULTI-LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REFORM

An ecosystemic autopsy of LH’s case reveals multi-level systemic dysfunction across individual, familial, institutional, and policy domains. Effective prevention and intervention, therefore, must operate through coordinated efforts across these ecological levels.

At the microsystem level, the family and school serve as the most immediate and influential contexts for adolescent’s socio-emotional development. Parents play an irreplaceable role in fostering children’s emotional competence and coping capacity. Mental support should not be outsourced to external professionals alone but embedded in daily parenting. For instance, emotional responsiveness, empathy, and validation are key ingredients in building psychological security and resilience [57,58]. Parents’ reactions to children’s negative emotions and maladaptive behaviors (e.g., anxiety, withdrawal or anger) significantly influence the formation of children’s self-worth and resilience. For teachers, it is important to recognize that students’ emotional and social struggles are not peripheral issues but central to

attention, school performance and overall development. An exclusive focus on academic grades may lead many psychological risk indicators to be overlooked. Therefore, teachers require ongoing professional training in mental health literacy to acquire knowledge and skills necessary for detecting early indicators of emotional and social distress, and for providing timely intervention or referral. Additionally, establishing learning environments that help students feel empathy, respect, and a sense of belonging should be considered as essential as academic instruction.

At the mesosystem level, collaborative efforts between schools and parents to establish multi-tiered, actionable systems for psychological support and crisis intervention are necessary. Schools should employ professional counselors to facilitate psychological screening, case monitoring, crisis intervention, and post-crisis support. Particularly, the implementation of regular mental health screenings and risk assessments could help ensure that potential issues are identified at an early stage. In daily educational practice, social-emotional learning and peer-support programs should be considered to strengthen students' constructive coping strategies, emotional regulation, interpersonal skills and psychological resilience. For boarding schools, where students are separated from their families and thus more vulnerable to loneliness and social isolation, providing diverse campus activities that release stress and promote social and emotional connectedness is highly recommended. Moreover, given that adolescents often refuse to disclose their difficulties and distress out of shame or fear, anonymous channels for mental support and crisis reporting, such as confidential mailboxes, online surveys, or hotlines is necessary to reduce psychological barriers for help-seeking.

At the macrosystem level, governance and policy-making from educational authorities requires systemic reform. In many regions, anti-bullying efforts remain largely dependent on principle-based documents and moral appeals while no concrete, actionable, and monitorable frameworks were formed. Tiered procedures for handling bullying incidents, standards for reporting and referring psychological crises, and timelines for home-school collaboration, for instance, should be clearly defined and operationalized with details. Furthermore, regional education departments should develop interdisciplinary mental health networks by integrating psychologists, psychiatrists, educational therapists, and social workers into consultative and supervisory structures. These networks could provide evidence-based guidance, professional supervision, and ongoing evaluation to ensure the sustainability and efficacy of school mental health systems. Through structured partnerships with professional mental health sectors, education authorities can enhance policy coherence, professional competence, and institutional accountability, which transforms school mental health governance from a reactive model to a proactive, systemic framework.

At the macrosystem level, governance and policy-making by educational authorities require systemic reform. In many regions, anti-bullying efforts still rely largely on principle-based documents and moral appeals, with few concrete, actionable, or monitorable frameworks in place. Tiered procedures for handling bullying incidents, standards for reporting and referring psychological crises, and timelines for home–school collaboration should be clearly defined and operationalized. Furthermore, regional education departments should establish interdisciplinary mental health networks by integrating professionals such as psychologists, psychiatrists, educational therapists, and social workers into consultative and supervisory structures. These networks can provide evidence-based suggestions, ongoing supervision, and evaluation to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of school mental health systems.

4. CONCLUSION

The present study conducted an ecosystemic autopsy on the Jinjiang "3·24" school bullying and suicide event to undercover its potential contributing factors across multiple ecological system layers. At the microsystem level, The family serves as a child's primary source of emotional security, providing a "secure base" for exploration and a "safe haven" during distress. When these functions are

compromised, children may suppress emotions, avoid seeking help, and internalize shame and self-blame, increasing vulnerability to psychological distress. Consistent, sensitive parental support is therefore crucial for buffering against long-term emotional harm. Teachers act as accessible adult figures within the school environment, responsible not only for academic guidance but also for detecting and responding to students' social-emotional difficulties. However, teachers often face limited training in mental health, heavy workloads, insufficient emotional support for teachers themselves, and unclear responsibility boundaries within school systems. These factors collectively weaken teachers' capacity to remain emotionally attuned, responsive, and effective in addressing students' emerging difficulties. Among peers, bullying not only damages emotional well-being and self-esteem but also impact the development of social skills. As these abilities being impaired, students find it harder to form positive peer connections, leading to increased loneliness and withdrawal. This growing isolation further elevates the risk for depression, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts.

The mesosystem represents the interaction between LH's family and school, which ideally should form a coherent support network for a child's development and well-being. In the present case, communication breakdowns, blurred role boundaries, and collapsed trust between the family and the school implied a lack of functional alliance between the two systems. Such relationship could disrupt early detection, feedback and delay coordinated intervention. The exosystem refers to broader institutional and policy structures that indirectly affect the child. Although anti-bullying policies existed, they were largely conceptual and lacked actionable procedures and clear accountability mechanisms. These ambiguities might lead schools to engage in superficial measures or make decisions that are ineffective and potentially risky. Moreover, the absence or inadequacy of institutional frameworks also prevents the system from anticipating risks and implementing proactive prevention. Consequently, LH's emotional suffering persisted, as her mesosystem and exosystem failed to serve as protective layers.

The macrosystem involves societal culture, values, and norms that shape children's development and how institutions respond to their needs. In the present case, the strong societal emphasis on academic achievement, conformity, and "face" contributed to deprioritizing emotional well-being, making children feel that their psychological distress would be dismissed. Cultural expectations of self-reliance and not "bothering others" might increase LH's tendency to conceal suffering, while sensitivity to shame further discouraged disclosure of bullying experiences. Collectively, these sociocultural pressures might increase likelihood of choosing maladaptive responses in face of crisis events. The chronosystem highlights the role of time and developmental stages in shaping a child's experiences and resilience. The transition from primary to middle school, combined with boarding arrangements, disrupted LH's familiar social networks and limited family connections, leaving her with an unstable support system. Early adolescence, marked by identity exploration and heightened sensitivity to social evaluation, makes individuals particularly vulnerable to experiences of exclusion, conflict, or humiliation. Over time, the accumulation of negative social experiences and a fragile self-concept can erode resilience, increasing the risk of hopelessness and suicidal thoughts.

Taken together, these systemic failures created a continuous network of risk. Thus, effective prevention and intervention require coordinated, multi-level efforts. Families must provide consistent emotional responsiveness and psychological security. Schools should train teachers to identify and address early signs of distress and create learning environments where students feel respected, valued, and connected. Regular mental health screenings, social-emotional learning, peer-support programs, and diverse campus activities can strengthen coping skills, interpersonal competence, and connectedness. Confidential, low-threshold channels for help-seeking are critical to reduce psychological barriers and encourage early disclosure. Education authorities should issue concrete, actionable guidelines or policies regarding the school bullying. Tiered procedures for incident handling, standards for reporting and referral, clear timelines for home–school collaboration and institutional accountability should be clarified with details. Collaboration with mental health professionals can support education authorities in policy guidance, implementation oversight and ongoing evaluation.

It is important to note that publicly available information regarding this incident is extremely limited. Many analyses and inferences in the present study are drawn through ecological systems theory and existing research. To ensure the public and parents' right to be informed, and to facilitate future prevention and intervention efforts in school-based crises, it is crucial for government agencies, law enforcement, and schools to release relevant information as fully as possible while protecting privacy and legal rights. Transparency not only facilitates systemic evaluation and reflection but also promotes ongoing optimization of institutional design, educational practice, and multidisciplinary collaboration. By accumulating more cases analyzed through an ecosystemic lens, society can identify previously overlooked or hidden issues, establish more effective intervention mechanisms, and reduce the likelihood of similar tragedies.

In conclusion, the LH's case represents that crisis often stem from cumulative dysfunction across multiple ecological layers, rather than from individual vulnerability alone. Preventing tragedies like LH's depends on establishing a sustainable, multi-level ecological support system that ensures all students receive timely recognition, support, and intervention before crises escalate.

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The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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9. DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Not applicable. No primary data were generated or analysed in this study.

10. ETHICS APPROVAL

Not applicable. This study did not require ethics approval.

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