

# The influence of Ethnic Identity on students' Problem Behaviors in Rural Tibet Elementary Boarding School: the mediating role of School Belonging

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**Abstract:** A questionnaire survey was conducted on 211 rural Tibetan boarding elementary school students to explore the effects of ethnic identity and school belonging on elementary school students' problems behaviors, and a mediating effect test was conducted based on school belonging as a way to construct a model of the relationship between the three, and to investigate the mechanisms for promoting the psychological health of rural boarding elementary school students in ethnic areas. The results found that (1) Ethnic identity, school belonging, and problems behaviors of primary school students in rural boarding schools in Tibet is better than the median of theory. (2) Externalizing problems were bilaterally correlated to ethnic identity and school belonging while internalizing behavior only correlated to school belonging. (3) Ethnic identity influences externalizing behaviors through school belonging. It was concluded that school belonging mediated the role of ethnic identity in influencing externalizing behaviors of elementary school students.

**Keywords:** ethnic identity; school belonging; problems behaviors; rural boarding primary school

## 1. Introduction

Problem behaviors are these behaviors that occur in the course of an individual's development are detrimental to character and physical and mental development<sup>[1]</sup>, problem behavior implies violation of social norms and ethical standards<sup>[2]</sup>, or deviation from the normative standard in the process of socialization of individuals<sup>[3]</sup>. Achenbach (1991) divides problem behaviors into two categories: internalizing emotional problems and externalizing behavioral problems<sup>[4]</sup>; internalizing problems are internal negative emotions experienced by the individual, such as anxiety or depression; externalizing problems are related to the individual's negative adaptation to the external environment<sup>[5]</sup>, mainly those behaviors that are hurtful and destructive to other people, such as aggressive behavior<sup>[6]</sup>.

The detection rate of problem behaviors among children and adolescents in China is gradually increasing<sup>[7]</sup>. Problem behaviors show relatively great differences in gender and age<sup>[8]</sup>: boys exhibit more externalizing behaviors<sup>[9]</sup> but girls show more internalizing problems<sup>[10]</sup>; individuals of different ages exhibit different problem behaviors, most of the problem behaviors of elementary school students are related to school life, such as school bullying and aggressive behavior<sup>[11]</sup>. Children's problem behaviors are influenced by various factors. Type of temperament of the individual<sup>[12]</sup> and self-esteem<sup>[13]</sup> is individual traits predict different problem behaviors. Social Economic status<sup>[14]</sup>, parenting style<sup>[15]</sup> and parental conflict<sup>[16]</sup> are all important risk factors in family for predicting problem behaviors. Good atmosphere of the school<sup>[17]</sup> and the relationship with classmate<sup>[18]</sup> is social factors which are negatively associated with problem behaviors.

Ethnic Identity is the individual's belief and attitude to their nation and the recognition of their national identity<sup>[19]</sup>. Ethnic identity is an important variable of cultural environmental for personal growth and has a great impact on the personal psychology and behavior<sup>[20]</sup>. Ethnic identity positively predicts psychological traits such as hope and self-control, positive emotional experiences<sup>[21]</sup>, higher mental health level<sup>[22]</sup>. Therefore, we hypothesize that ethnic identity influences individuals' problem behaviors.

School belonging<sup>[23]</sup> refers to students being identified with their school and being devoted to their school in their organizations, emotion and mentality, and willing to taking on their responsibility and taking part in activity of school as a member<sup>[24]</sup>. School belonging has an important impact on students' psychological behavior<sup>[25]</sup>, positively correlated to positive emotions and negatively related to negative emotions<sup>[26]</sup>.

Preceding studies have also found that ethnic identity can influence college students' psychological well-being through the mediating effect of school belongs<sup>[27]</sup>. Problem behavior is also an important indicator of the level of representation of mental health. In Tibet, boarding schools have been the main form of education based on its natural trait such as sparseness of land and difficulty in travel<sup>[28]</sup>. Boarding schools have become an important environmental variable affecting children's mental health and behavioral problems<sup>[29]</sup>. Therefore, we infer that school belonging mediate the relationship between ethnic identity and problem behavior of elementary school students.

In summary, this study examines the mechanisms under the effects of ethnic identity and school belonging on the problem behaviors of rural Tibetan boarding elementary school students and to provide effective and reasonable suggestions for reducing problem behaviors of elementary school students in boarding schools of ethnic area.

## 2. Research methods

### 2.1. Participants

The participants were 211 elementary school students from a boarding elementary school in rural Motuo County of Tibet in China. There were 32 students in Grade 1, 34 in Grade 2, 39 in Grade 3, 39 in Grade 4, 32 in Grade 5, and 35 in Grade 6, 91 boys and 120 girls. The age range of the students was 7 to 13 years old, with a mean age of 10.56 years (SD=2.11).

### 2.2. Measure

#### Ethnic Identity

The Questionnaire of Ethnic identity<sup>[30]</sup> was used to measure ethnic identity. The questionnaire has 30 questions, including three dimensions: ethnic identity, Chinese national identity and lie detector questions. Responses are made on a 5-point likert scale (1=totally disagree, 2=disagree, 3=not sure, 4=agree, 5=totally agree). Higher scores indicate a higher level of ethnic identity of the participants. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.88.

#### School Belonging

The Questionnaire of school belonging of Pupil<sup>[16]</sup> was used to measure School belonging. The questionnaire has 20 questions, including four dimensions: Academic engagement, human environment, peer relationship and school involvement. Responses are made on a 5-point likert scale (1=totally disagree, 2=disagree, 3=not sure, 4=agree, 5=totally agree). Higher scores indicate a higher level of school belonging of the participants. The questionnaire was proved to have good reliability and validity. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.91.

#### Problem Behavior

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire<sup>[31]</sup> was used to measure emotional and problematic behavior of adolescents. The questionnaire has 25 questions (the 7th, 11th, 14th, 21th, 25th question is reverse score), including five dimensions: behavior problems, emotional symptoms, hyperactive attention deficit, peer relationship and prosocial behavior. The questionnaire included a difficult section and a strengths section, where the difficult section included four dimensions: emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactive attention inability, and peer interaction problems, and the strengths section included one dimension of prosocial behavior. The scale can be divided into internalizing and externalizing problems, where internalizing problems are synthesized from two dimensions, emotional symptoms and peer interaction, and externalizing problems are synthesized from two dimensions, hyperactive attention failure and conduct problems, with higher scores indicating more problem behaviors.

### 2.3. Data analyses

In this study, the data were measured in class, and the scale was collected on the spot and SPSS 22.0 was used for data analyses.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Common method deviation test

Since all the data in the research were from student's self-reports, in order to avoid common methodological deviations, the Harman single factor method was used for statistical control, the results showed that there were 36 factors with a characteristic value greater than 1, and the first factor explained variation of 29.18%, which was much less than the 40% critical value. Therefore, the influence of common method deviation on the results of this study can be excluded.

### 3.2. Descriptive statistics

As shown in table 1, the statistical indicators of the mean and standard deviation of the study are as follows: the ethnic identity score is  $3.79 \pm 0.63$ , the school belonging score is  $3.59 \pm 0.88$ , the internalizing problems score is  $4.68 \pm 2.06$ , the externalizing problems score is  $4.11 \pm 1.71$ . Both the mean score of ethnic identity and school belonging exceeded 3, indicating that ethnic identity and school belonging in this study were higher than the national standard.

Comparative analysis of students' ethnic identity, school belonging, internalizing problems, externalizing problems, and prosocial behavior scores was conducted using independent samples t-tests. The results showed that ethnic identity ( $t = 2.08, p < 0.05$ ) and school belonging ( $t = 2.51, p < 0.05$ ) differed between genders. Internalizing problems ( $t = 1.55, p > 0.05$ ), externalizing problems ( $t = 1.56, p > 0.05$ ) and prosocial behavior ( $t = 0.27, p > 0.05$ ) did not differ significantly between genders. One-way ANOVA was used to compare the scores of students' ethnic identity, school belonging, internalizing problems, externalizing problems and prosocial behaviors. The results showed that the differences between grades were significant for ethnic identity ( $F = 5.09, p < 0.001$ ), school belonging ( $F = 4.31, p < 0.001$ ), internalizing problems ( $F = 15.66, p < 0.001$ ), significant for externalizing problems ( $F = 6.96, p < 0.001$ ), and significant for prosocial behaviors ( $F = 7.84, p < 0.001$ ).

### 3.3. Relationship between ethnic identity, school belonging and problem behaviors

#### 3.3.1. Correlations of the variables

Correlation analysis of ethnic identity, school belonging and problem behaviors (internalizing behavior, externalizing behavior, and prosocial behavior) (in Table 1) showed that internalizing problems were not correlated ( $r = .02, p > 0.05$ ) with ethnic identity and negatively correlated with school belonging ( $r = -.22, p < 0.05$ ). Externalizing problems were negatively correlated ( $r = -.19, p < 0.05$ ) with ethnic identity and negatively correlated with school belonging ( $r = -.23, p < 0.05$ ).

Table 1: Correlations between ethnic identity, school belonging and problem behavior

	M	SD	1	2	3	4
Ethnic Identity	3.79±0.63		1			
School Belonging	3.59±0.88		.51**	1		
Internalizing Problem	4.68±2.06		-.02	-.22**	1	
Externalizing Problem	4.11±1.71		-.19*	-.23**	.63**	1

\*  $P < 0.05$ , \*\*  $P < 0.01$

Notes. 1=ethnic identity, 2=school belonging, 3=internalizing problem, 4=Externalizing problem

#### 3.3.2. The mediating role of school belonging between ethnic identity and externalizing behavior

Externalizing problems were bilaterally related to ethnic identity and school belonging. Thus, further mediating effect analysis can be performed.

The SPSS PROCESS (Hayes, 2012)<sup>[32]</sup> was used to test the mediating effect of school belonging between ethnic identity and externalizing behavior. Regression analysis showed (in table 2) that ethnic identity negatively predicted externalizing behavior significantly ( $\beta = -0.45, t = -2.25, p < 0.01$ ). Ethnic

identity significantly positively predicted school belonging ( $\beta = 0.66, t = 6.41, p < 0.001$ ). When ethnic identity and school belonging entered the regression equation simultaneously, the predictive effect of ethnic identity on externalizing behavior remained significant ( $\beta = -0.36, t = -4.39, p < 0.01$ ), and school belonging had a negative predictive effect on externalizing behavior ( $\beta = -0.16, t = -2.13, p < 0.01$ ). In addition, the upper and lower limits of bootstrap 95% confidence intervals for the direct effect of ethnic identity on externalizing behavior and the mediating effect of school belonging did not contain 0 (in table 3), indicating that ethnic identity not only directly predicted externalizing behavior, but also predicted externalizing behavior through the mediating effect of school belonging, with this direct effect (-0.36) and the mediating effect (-0.09) accounting for 80% and 20% of the total effect, respectively (in Table 3).

Table 2: The mediation model of school belonging between ethnic identity and externalizing behavior

Predictive Variable	Outcome Variable								
	1: Externalizing Problem			2: School Belonging			3: Externalizing Problem		
	B	SE	t	B	SE	t	B	SE	t
Ethnic identity	-0.45	0.22	-2.25*	0.66	0.12	6.41***	-0.36	0.24	-4.39*
School belonging							-0.16	0.18	-2.13*
R2	0.23			0.29			0.24		
F	13.34***			18.03***			10.15***		

\*  $P < 0.05$ , \*\*  $P < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $P < 0.001$

Table 3: Analysis of the mediating effect of school belonging

Mediation model	Effect quantity	SE	95%CI	Relative mediation effect
Indirect effect	-0.09	0.11	[-0.32, -0.11]	20%
Direct effect	-0.36	0.22	[-0.79, -0.07]	80%
Total effect	-0.45	0.21	[-0.88, -0.03]	

## 4. Discuss

### 4.1. National identity, school belonging, and problem behavior status

In this study, the scores of ethnic identity and school belonging were higher than the middle value of the scale, indicating that the level of ethnic identity and school belonging in Tibetan rural boarding elementary school was relatively high. The scores of internal behavior and external behavior lower than the middle value of the scale, indicating that the problem behaviors of rural Tibetan boarding primary school students are positive in general.

Consistent with previous research [27] the results of this study showed that ethnic identity positively predicted the score of school belonging. Because individuals with higher ethnic identity have more positive self-esteem [21] and emotions [22], and thus have better psychological adjustment and develop a higher level of school belonging in the school. It has been found that there is a correlation between school belonging and problem behaviors. The present study further confirmed that school belonging negatively predicted internal and external behavior. This further confirms that school belonging is indeed an important environmental variable influencing adolescents' psychological and behavioral development [25], and school belonging can make individuals feel more supportive and secure [26], which can lead to less problem behaviors.

### 4.2. The mediating role of school belonging in the relationship between ethnic identity and problem behavior

School belonging was used as a mediator to construct a mediation model of ethnic identity influencing problem behavior. Results found that school belonging has a mediating role in ethnic identity and external behavior. The ethnic identity of elementary school students influenced their externalizing behavior through school belonging, and the direct explanation rate of ethnic identity for externalizing behavior was 80%, while the explanation rate of ethnic identity for school belongings as a mediating variable for Externalizing behavior was 20%.

Previous research has found that ethnic identity and school belonging are important for mental health [22] [25], and this study also found that ethnic identity and school belonging have important

effects on elementary school students' problem behaviors. Ethnic identity not only has a direct effect in externalizing behaviors of elementary school students, but also influences external behaviors through the mediating role of school belonging. This is because the concept of ethnic identity itself contains both emotional and behavioral dimension<sup>[18]</sup>, which is not only presented emotionally as belonging to and commitment to the nation, but also as recognition and active involvement in ethnic activities. These emotions and behaviors can be influenced not only by natural factors, but also by residential factors and social culture, and residential schools are a very important personal residential and cultural factor<sup>[26]</sup>. Rural boarding schools in Tibet, where all students are ethnic minorities and all teachers are ethnic minorities receiving Han Chinese specialist education, provide a better ethnic culture and ethnic education atmosphere and continue the previous family and ethnic education. Thus ethnic identity can influence students' psychological and behavioral development through a sense of belonging to the school. In the future, we need to further strengthen the promotion and education of ethnic culture, conduct more activities with ethnic characteristics, encourage elementary school students to explore their own ethnic culture, to think about their role in their own ethnicity, to understand their own relationship with their ethnicity, to enhance their identification with their ethnic culture, to strengthen the individual's confidence, sense of honor and sense of mission in their own ethnicity, and thus to enhance their sense of belonging and to reduce external behavior.

## 5. Conclusion

(1) Ethnic identity, school belonging, and problems behaviors of primary school students in rural boarding schools in Tibet is better than the median of theory. (2) Externalizing problems were bilaterally related to ethnic identity and school belonging while internalizing behavior only related to school belonging. (3) Ethnic identity influences externalizing behaviors through school belonging. It was concluded that school belonging mediated the role of ethnic identity in influencing externalizing behaviors of elementary school students, whereas it did not play a role in internalizing emotions.

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