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## A Study of the Phenomenon of Bullying in Public Sector Secondary Schools in Gilgit, Gilgit-Baltistan

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this study was to assess teachers' understanding of the phenomenon of bullying and bullying-victim students' experiences in three public sector secondary schools in Gilgit, GB, Pakistan. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview and informal interactions with four teachers and three students. Teachers knew bullying as violence inflicted upon weaker students by older students. They seemed to be unsure of what includes 'bullying'. Resultantly, Rules and regulations at school with regard to bullying were also unclear. Many behaviors defined as 'bullying' in literature were ignored and accepted as a common form of behavior among school children. Parents' education level and social status indicated a relationship with bullying behavior. The victims, usually unheard of, also mentioned that they were teased by bullies more frequently, threatened with different types of further abuse if they reported to teachers or parents. They felt afraid, stressed, demotivated, felt low self-esteem, depressed. It is recommended that bullying should be curbed from the very beginning whenever noticed. Explicit strategies and their promulgation within the school should be in place.*

**Key Words:** Bullying; School Violence, Physical Harm, Parental Role, School Stress

### Introduction

Bullying in social lives is reported by studies from all over the world. Approximately 5% of the youngest pupils were bullied on a weekly basis; boys were less bullied than girls in the western countries ([Khawar & Malik, 2016](#)). Furthermore, in the European countries, bullying has been found, in elementary school, where 25% of bullying is observed (WHO, 2018). Students who were bullied are more quickly inclined to involve in bullying activities rather than the less bullied (McNeal & Espelage, 2018). From the Pakistani context, few studies have been conducted into bullying. However, newspaper frequently reports such

bullying incidence. [Khawar and Malik \(2016\)](#) report a high frequency of verbal bullying followed by physical bullying among elementary grade students. They also indicate bullying behavior in terms of verbal, racial and sexual.

One of the difficulties in understanding bullying is defining what constitutes 'bullying'. According to [Roland and Munthe \(1989\)](#), "Bullying is longstanding violence, physical or mental, conducted by an individual or a group and directed against an individual who is not able to define himself in the actual situation" (p. 143). The most common definition of bullying is "When

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someone is exposed to negative actions from one or more persons recurrently over time to negative actions on the part of one or more other students" (Kvarme, Misvaer, Valla, & Myhre, 2019 p. 1). According to Roland and Idsoe (2001), as cited by Smith and Sharp (1994), bullying is planning to abuse power and harm others.

Thus bullying involves a relatively continuous hostile behavior of someone towards some other who is meeker or helpless somehow. A short term such as an incident of quarrel or threats occurring between two people in a genuine conflict may not be perceived as bullying. Bullying seems to be a relatively hostile attitude for a longer time with the intention of harming physically or psychologically. Kvarme, Misvaer, Valla, and Myhre (2019) mentioned similar views citing the World Health Organization (2018) that 9-13% of children (aged 11-15) were bullied in a period of two months. Literature reveals that bullying could be physical (hitting, punching, kicking, guns, pushing), verbal (revile, rumors, name-calling, teasing, upbraid, ignorance, social boycott) and cyberbullying (emails, messages, hacking social media accounts, intimidation uploading pictures on social media, videos) (Cullingford & Morrison, 1995).

According to Sujja, Atta and Shujjat (2014), in the context of Pakistan, bullying issues are not reported as a serious problem in educational institutions. There are no efforts to design rules and regulations against bullying. The aggressive behaviors of teachers also degrade students who are usually taken for granted. The quality of students and teachers relationships and peer relationships also strongly impact positive student behaviors (Cullingford & Morrison, 1995). Peer bullying has also been commonly observed and reported (Khawar & Malik, 2016). Students who are bullied by peers usually show more aggressive behavior in the classroom and remain strongly disconnected from class, and have a low level of social performance.

A recent incident in one of the public sector schools stirred researchers' attention towards studying bullying behavior. During teaching practicum, many student-teachers reported incidence of violence in the school in which they were sent for teaching practicum that the whole school students were divided into two groups, city students and village's students. The city students were more roguish rather than the village's

students. They were violent to the students who were recently migrated from side villages. There were continuous fights reported after school overs which teachers would overlook, saying that out of school behavior was not their responsibility.

Researcher's curiosity to study bullying behavior in the literature such as 'school violence' indicated that bullying was an under-explored area of concern in our schools (Sujja, Atta & Shujjat, 2014). Therefore, there seems a need to develop further understanding of bullying behavior in terms of how teachers and students define bullying in the first place. This could be done by studying the perception of teachers and through observation of lived experiences of students at schools at the secondary level. Furthermore, how teachers respond to such behavior and how it impacts students' learning at school are such areas of importance for educational researchers. The present study is actually an attempt to understand these areas of importance pertaining to bullying behavior in the context of Gilgit, Pakistan.

## Literature Review

### Concept and Definition of Bullying in the Literature

The formal study began on bullying in 1970 in Scandinavia after that Olweus (1978) wrote a book named *Aggression in School: Bullies and Whipping Boys* in which he defines bullying and the concept of bullying as: "A person is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons" (p. 98). With the passage of time, other European countries, and Australia, and Japan also identified the bullying issue. In this definition, the word negative action encompasses a wide range, different factors involved in negative action and essential to explore these factors. Negative action means physical assault, aggressive behavior, verbal abusing, electronic bullying, social boycott, etc. (Olweus, 1993). According to Smith and Sharp (1994), the definition of bullying is "systematic abuse of power" (p. 2). According to the Oxford (2019) learner's dictionary, the definition of bullying is "the use of strength or power to frighten or hurt weaker people" (para 1<sup>st</sup>). Bullying is mostly done in schools because a lot of diversity is found. Students come from various backgrounds and social environments. Due to this

diversity, some students act like bullies, and they pretend to be stronger. Different authors have different concepts about bullying. Some authors agree with the above-mentioned factors ranging from name-calling, joking, rumors, belonging and physical touch are not considered as bullying.

### **Bullying in the School Context**

Bullying in schools is an old problem, and with the passage of time, bullying has adopted a new way in developed countries; cyberbullying is most famous in educational institutions, especially in underdeveloped countries, including Pakistan, where direct and indirect bullying seems too high (Cullingford et al. 1995; Khawar et al., 2016). In direct bullying, physical bullying is common, while in indirect bullying, the verbal and social boycott is reported again and again (Olweus, 1993; Shuja et al., 2019).

### **Physical Bullying**

The most common type of bullying is physical bullying. Physical bullying is defined as overt behavior by a student to others. Extreme physical bullying is beating, strangling, and shooting with guns. One of the bullyings is covert bullying, in which the bully cannot do overt bullying with victims, e.g. rape, locking up the victims in a locker. It is difficult for the teacher to help victims in such situations (Shariff, 2008; Smith et al., 2019). A roguish student targets other weaker students where he/she hits punches or kicks a weaker one (Smith, 2019). In the context of Pakistan, boys are mostly involved in physical bullying rather than girls. Girls are involved in indirect or relational bullying. Most girls are involved in extending rumors and backbiting. Some studies show that both boys and girls are equally involved in physical bullying (Shujia, et al., 2014).

### **Verbal Bullying**

Verbal bullying is most common in girls rather than boys. Whether boys are less involved in verbal bullying is not well clear. While in girls, verbal bullying such as name-calling, teasing, hurtful teasing, humiliating, or threatening someone, racist or sexist comment, verbal harassment and insulting are reportedly more common (Pepler & Craig, 2014). Verbal aggression is considered more effective rather than physical bullying. Verbal bullying is the repetition of

derogative remarks or names, which is common than physical bullying, particularly as youngsters mature (Berger, 2006).

### **Cyberbullying**

The definition of cyberbullying differs from the traditional definition. According to Shariff (2008), the tools or technologies which are used for the purpose of bullying is known as cyberbullying. Tools mean text messages, Messenger, Facebook, Gmail, and other media resources. Through these tools, bullying is done in school. In the context of Gilgit, cellphone text messages, Messenger, WhatsApp, and Gmail are used for bullying in educational institutions. Ahmed (2019) stated that bullying is pointing to dangers posed by online violence, cyber-bullying and digital harassment for individuals between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four in Asian countries (Wang et al. 2009).

### **Social bullying**

According to Smith (2011), the definition of social bullying is "Systematically excluding someone from social groups (you cannot play with us)" (p. 43) type of behavior. Social bullying is also called relational bullying, in which bullies harm the psychological and operation of the social system. In social bullying, bullies mostly spears rumors, ignoring, and backbiting, which excludes the victims from the social groups. Social bullying has many dangerous effects on student's school life; victims often get hurt from depression, anxiety, social isolation, and low self-esteem (Wang, 2009).

### **Objectives of the Study**

Following are the objectives of this study:

1. To explore the perspectives of public sector secondary school teachers about bullying
2. To examine the situation of victims of bullying about bullying and its impact on their school life
3. To understand how bullying impacts students' motivation and learning at school
4. To unfold ways and strategies how teachers overcome bullying behavior in their schools

### **Methodology**

The aim of this study was to explore teacher and

students' concepts of bullying and ways to tackle bullying situations and to bully impact on a child's school life. Researcher used a qualitative approach to explore the complex phenomenon of bullying and its related issues in secondary schools. The study focused on how teachers and management of school's cope with bullying at school and bullying impact a child's school life. The researcher selected a sample from a suburban area of Danyore District Gilgit, where a number of public and private schools are located. For the purpose of data collection, teachers and students were interviewed, followed by an unstructured and non-participatory observation were used. Four teachers participated from two schools. Four of the victims were identified from the same school students' sample for interviews. Their parents and teachers were requested to arrange a

meeting for consent and interviews prior to accessing the participants for interviews.

### Data Analysis, Findings and Discussion

This section presents an analysis and interpretation of data collected in the form of interviews from teachers and students from three public secondary schools from a hub populated area of Danyore, Gilgit, Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan. Since the views of teachers were assumed to be significantly different from victimized students, therefore, their views have been analyzed separately; first, teachers' views were analyzed, followed by lived experiences of victim-students. Before the analysis of data, teacher participants' characteristics are presented in table 1.

**Table 1.** Research Participants' Characteristics

Participants	Age	Gender	Qualification	Experience
Teacher A	48	Male	B. Ed. BA	27 years
Teacher B	40	Male	B. Ed. MA English	17 years
Teacher C	36	Male	B. Ed. M. Sc. in IR	3 years
Teacher D	32	Male	B. Ed. BS, M. Phil.	3 years

### Bullying as a Verbal and Physical Threat

The researcher came to an understanding based on the interviews that the participants viewed bullying as a verbal and physical threat. All other types can be reflected by these two major types of bullying, which can be observed inside a school. This means bullying involves some type of harm to a person's social standing or reducing a person's willingness to meet people through bullying. While the special effects of physical bullying may be more noticeable at first, verbal bullying is more insidious and, over long periods of time, works to abolish a child's self-image and self-esteem. Bullying is considered as teasing, which can also be considered as a type of psychological threat for example, one of the teacher participants identified, "Yes in public sector bullying is the main issue, particularly in government schools; some children tease other children. Mostly older boys' tease the younger." When we examine the literature on bullying, we find that there are many studies that describe bullying as teasing in which children verbally tease other or smaller ones. Other types of teasing may involve spreading rumors against others, touching in a rude way,

name-calling, and social boycotts, and false propagation to harass the perceived 'enemy' are common items of bullying, through which violence and aggression can lead to mental health problems ([Khawar & Malik, 2016](#)).

### Bullies Background as a Major Cause of Bullying behavior

The researcher asked questions related to some of the causes for the bullying behavior; research participants held the family background of students as one of the major causes for their bullying behavior. By comparing all the responses regarding the bullies' background, they stated that: "If a child has a poor social background and cannot get proper nurturing from their parents then those children learn bad behavior from their family, and their surrounding and the social set up at large. Hence their negative behavior is reflected in school also."

Previous studies have also frequently reported the social structure and family background of children are responsible for their disruptive behavior in schools. Children who come from low socio-economic family

backgrounds are more likely to engage in bullying. Such children engage in maladaptive behaviour like drug abuse, violence and posture a serious threat to mental and physical health ([Shujja, Atta & Shujjat, 2014](#)).

### **Lack of Policies against Bullying in School**

The researcher asked the question from the participant about the school administration policies against bullying. They all responded more or less in a similar way stating that the government institution/school structure is such that which does not allow to have effective policies. The teachers and school administrators cannot make policies because it is the responsibility of the education department at the district level, possibly the directorate level. Teachers cannot take action against any child or expel them from school even if they continually behave in an unacceptable way in school. Literature suggests that strong anti-bullying policies and their implementation can decrease bullying behavior. If these policies are implemented at the school level, it decreases the rate of bullying. Adoption of active policies that involve all backers within the wider community are helpful for decrease bullying ([Ashfaq, Waqas & Naveed, 2018](#)).

### **Approaches to Tackle Bullying**

In the sampled school, teacher participants' views suggested a number of ways that they used to tackle bullying behavior in their school. These are described below: (1) *Punishment*. Punishment, both physical and psychological were being used, such as spanking (physically), discouraging the bullying in front of others etc. Although the teacher has no written policy against bullying, neither they were guided on how to tackle such cases, it was mostly on their personal judgment and choice to correct the bullying behavior. School teachers used punishment based on their subjective judgment of the nature and intensity of the attitude of bullies. (2) Another technique teachers employed were calling the bullies parents in. To tackle with bully's the school administration also calls parents to get help from them regarding their children's behavior at school. Participant A stated. *"Sometimes parents also fail to do something to correct the behavior of their children, but they suggest also punishing their children who involve in bullying activities."* All participants

agreed that the role of parents to overcome bullying is very helpful because parents are to care for their children.

### **The Suggestion of Teacher to overcome Bullying**

The role of the teacher in the classroom is considered fundamental because teachers bear leading positions in educational institutions and communities or society. It's the responsibility of the teacher to promote healthy relationships and to prevent the child from negative activates or behaviors. For this purpose, it is necessary for the teacher to make policies and rules to overcome the indispensable situation. For example, if the bullying issue is faced, the teacher suggests some rules to overcome bullying; for instance, participant A's said:

- Bullying is an important issue in school, and in order to control bullying initially, teachers lack in numbers, so the lack of teachers should be overcome. It will give minimum time for students to involve in such activities that provide a ground for bullying attitude and hostile behavior.
- Teachers may spare time to address ethical issues and provide information about how to stay calm, patient and emotionally react towards various situations.
- Establishes good coordination among children, parents, and teachers.
- The teacher should adopt the positive language and avoids negative language.
- The administration should make strict policies against bullying.
- The bullies should be punished and prohibited.

Literature also shows similar strategies against bullying; for example, teachers can also use additional strategies to overcome bullying, such as parent involvement, change of class to divide the bullying gang, modified behavior modification plan, and concentrated, individual counselling ([Smith et al., 1994](#)).

In the following section, interview responses by bullied students will be presented. With the help of literature, we identified those students as 'bullied' in terms of any violence and consistently received threats more than once by other students. An initial but informal interaction was

made with students with the permission of school heads and the teachers in charge.

**Table 2.** Research Participants' Characteristics (Bullying Effectees)

Participants	Age	Class
Student A	13	6 <sup>th</sup>
Student B	14	8 <sup>th</sup>
Student C	12	6 <sup>th</sup>
Student D	16	9 <sup>th</sup>

The following themes frequently emerged from the interview of the victims.

### **Punishment and Reconciliation**

The researcher asked the question to the victimized students whether they reported about the bullying behavior to their teachers or parents and what their teacher's role was if they reported to them about the teasing or threatening of other students, students A said that: *"Teachers gives corporal punishment to bully, and they ask us to forgive them in the condition that they would not do that again."* There is a difference between the teacher strategy and literature strategy, literature shows Physical punishment or corporal punishment has a negative impact on children's lives, such as academic performance and personality development. But the teacher used corporal punishment or physical punishment to handle bullying. It is necessary for the teacher to adopt an alternative way to handle bullying situations ([Naz et al., 2011](#)).

### **Parents' Interference (Reconciliation, Complaint to Teacher and School)**

Parents and teachers are responsible for handling the children's issues; in-home parents would be trying to know the child's issue, and while in school, teachers handle the issue. The researcher asked the question related to the parents' strategies against bullying. All the participants shared the same comment; for example, participant D said: *"Yes, if any student teases me, I tell my parents, elder brother, and teachers. Once I told my parents in detail that they cut my way, they teased me and threatened me. Then the parents and teacher solved the problems."*

According to [Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, and Wiener \(2019\)](#), victims share their problems or bullying with their teachers. The teacher should take and immediate action against bullies. According to [Elahi \(2019\)](#), parents and teachers need to take the necessary step to protect

children. Parents create a friendly environment with children, decrease the communication gap and talk in detail about school issues.

### **Suggestions by Bully-Victim Student Participants**

The victim students shared some suggestions to overcome or tackle bullies students. The participants' responses are summarized into the following: (1) Bullying victims did not report to their parents or/and teachers for fear of revenge by the bullies if they did so. They seem to feel helpless and wanted to change school without parents having complained to the teachers about bullying children. However, this suggestion may not be useful; therefore, school administration should identify the bully themselves before they act upon other students. Or, they may adopt strategies such as they can keep the information by victimized students and parents confidential and then keep an eye on such children without letting them know about any complaints against them. (2) Properly guide weaker students on how to respond to unfavorable situations if anyone around creates for them. (3) Strict rules and their implementations, including expelling the bully from school.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Due to Covid-situation, we could not access parents; otherwise, their views could have shed more light on the way they perceive bullying and how they tackle their situation. The study also is limited in terms of students' samples as it was difficult to locate and isolate the victimized cases from the school in order to interview without prior permission of parents. They seemed that they could not express the way they were being bullied;

however, they reported violence and physical threats they received from their older peers.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The present study aimed to understand the phenomenon of bullying at secondary schools in the context of Gilgit-Baltistan. The data from interviews of secondary school teachers and four students who were victimized by bullying indicated that mostly older boys do bully on weaker and younger students at school. One of the ways they bully is by snatching of food and other stationery of younger and meek students along with threats of consequences in case they reported to teachers and parents against them. Teachers seemed helpless with such behaviour due to a lack of clear rules, policies and practices. Bullying behavior was usually not identified earlier.

A series of bullying behavior only when culminated in an incident could attract the attention of teachers and parents. In such cases, teachers rely on using corporal punishment. The overall culture of the schools in the public sector is that minor teasing, calling names and other belittling behavior is not considered as 'bullying.' Only physical violence. What behavior includes as 'bullying behavior' was not clear among teachers and students as indicated in the literature on bullying (e. g., [Roland & Munthe, 1989](#)). Lack of effective strategies and teacher engagement and

interaction with students due to administrative activities did not allow for surveillance and timely measures to curb bullying behavior. Lack of teachers and teacher absenteeism also seemed to be one of the key factors that provide space for bullying behavior in schools. Bullying students' socio-economic background was found to be another key factor that contributed to their attitudes towards other schoolmates.

As for the types of bullying, it can be categorized as done in literature (e.g. [Ashfaq et al., 2018](#)) which include physical bullying and verbal. Some parents even physically punish their children at home more frequently, which leads to developing a delinquent behavior of such children, which is expressed in a school setting. As for suggestions, based on the study findings and researchers' own understanding, 'bullying needs to be defined at the school level before doing anything about it. In general, fulfilling the issue of lack of teachers in school also seems to be a highly recommendable measure in order to minimize bullying at school. The teacher should spend maximum time in class with students as long as they are at school. The teacher needs to focus on practising ethics along with curricular activities in class. Along with that, it will also be useful to establish good coordination and communication mechanism among children, parents, and teachers.

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