The Unseen Classroom Challenge: Maping Student Experiences and Faculty Interventions on Bullying in Pakistani Higher Education

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Abstract

This qualitative study is a research on the ongoing reality of bullying in higher education institutions in Punjab, Pakistan; disproving the false notion that bullying reduces as age advances. The study examines the prevalence, manifestations, effects, and institutional reaction to bullying through semi-structured interviews with 75 people (50 students and 25 teachers) in five universities. The results indicate that 58.7 percent of students have experienced bullying, with most of the bullying being verbal harassment (49.3 percent) and cyber-bullying. The research reveals that there has been a major shift in the bullying patterns at the university scale whereby physical aggression has been replaced by more advanced psychological and online bullying. According to both students and teachers, the consequences are severe such as psychological distress (92% of teachers, 84% of students) and academic disengagement and social isolation. In spite of these effects, the study reveals some important lapses in the systems: 8 out of 10 students have stated that they did not receive any anti-bullying programs organized on university level, and the number of teachers that have reported that they were unprepared and lacked support to take action regarding bullying cases was also 8 out of 10. The paper ends with evidence-based suggestions of extensive institutional changes, which encompass the compulsory training, open-line reporting and built-in mental health support systems, specific to the Pakistani higher learning environment.

Keywords: *Bullying, Higher Education, Pakistan, Student Victimization, Faculty Intervention, Cyber-bullying, Institutional Response, Qualitative Research.*

1. Introduction

As a complicated and widespread type of interpersonal aggression that implies intentionality, repetition, and a particular power imbalance (Olweus, 1993), bullying has become a burning issue in the educational domain of the global community. Conceptually viewed in history as a rite of passage that was limited to childhood and adolescence, modern studies categorically define bullying as a significant social health event that has its consequences even in adulthood (Armitage, 2021). The tripartite conceptualization that Dan Olweus created, including deliberate harm, recurrence in time, and power imbalance, is the backbone of scholarly and political theories globally. Nevertheless, these criteria are rather difficult to operationalize, especially as bullying changes in the digital environment and moves to adult education (Hellström and Beckman, 2023).

Although substantial knowledge has been gathered on the prevalence, dynamics and implications of bullying in primary and secondary learning institutions, a persistent and detrimental assumption in academic publications and institutional practice remains that bullying dissipates or disappears as students grow up and enter higher education (Lund and Ross, 2017). This presumption has resulted in a serious blindfold, which has led to a tremendous disregard of the forms of bullying in tertiary settings and a considerable gap in academic knowledge and institutional policy formulation and effective interventions that apply to adult learners. These effects are extreme especially considering that bullying in post-secondary institutions is beyond a conflict between two children to cause extensive and, in many cases, long-lasting harm on the psychosocial and academic pathways of the parties (Zych et al., 2019).

This research gap is particularly acute when the observation is made in terms of the non-Western, socio-culturally oriented realities like Pakistan. The current situation in the higher education of the country is characterized by a specific combination of factors that predispose and determine specific manifestations of bullying. They are extremely competitive academic cultures that might instill hostility instead of cooperation; strong-rooted hierarchical and patriarchal social systems that might discourage reporting and accept some types of aggressive behavior; the spread of smartphones and social media that allow new manifestations of cyber-bullying; and an apparent deficiency of institutional anti-bullying policies explicitly designed to work in a university context (Ali and Karmani, 2023). Moreover, the concept of bullying, which mostly leans towards the results of research carried out in Scandinavian and Western settings, highlights its occurrence rates and effects in the primary and secondary schools, yet the translation to various socio-cultural settings is understudied (Khan et al., 2022).

Early quantitative research in Pakistani institutions of higher learning portends a worrying trend that needs immediate redress. The studies show that more than 60 percent of university students report engaging in cyber-bullying practices (Musharraf and Anis-ul-Haque, 2018), and the research by other authors shows that three-quarters of university students have engaged in cyber-bullying, and 25 percent respondents have been victims, 4 percent perpetrators, and 39 percent both bully and victims (Saleem et al., 2021). Although these are alarming data, the available research in the Pakistani setting has been largely quantitative in nature, as the primary objective has been to determine prevalence rates but still there have been gaps in the available research on the qualitative, lived experience of the students and intervention strategies as viewed by the teachers.

The phenomenon is not only limited to peer-to-peer victimization but also to a more sophisticated and sometimes ignored phenomenon of upwards bullying or student-to-teacher aggression. It is a paradoxical scenario that people that occupy traditional authority positions are victims of those who have lower institutional power which put forth peculiar challenges. Student-to-teacher bullying is the act of vengeful conduct intended to derail the power and authority of teachers as described by De Wet (2010). This kind of bullying is often shrouded in secrecy and stigma, where even the teachers are afraid that by reporting such cases they will be viewed as incompetent in their profession and not as victimized. The fact that these dynamic relationships still persist in the field of higher education shows that the conceptualization of power disparities must be reformulated beyond its traditional physical strength or institutional status to incorporate social capital, digital literacy, and group relations.

Furthermore, operationalization of the essential requirements of bullying is more complicated in universities and online space. A classical idea of repetition is changed in the cyberspace, where a single post can be published, screen-copied and spread indefinitely, and results into repetitive damage by being brought to bear on technologies consisting of affordances instead of actions.

Equally, power imbalance in the adult population can be based on social pressure, group membership, economic differences or computer literacy instead of physical superiority. These developing attributes require a context-sensitive interpretation that can be able to effectively define behaviors that can otherwise be regarded as normal conflict or stress-inducing incivility in competitive academic settings.

Thus, the present research is going to follow the path of what may be defined as a silent epidemic in Pakistani higher education through an extensive qualitative research study carried out in universities of Punjab. It tries to become less prevalence-focused and more emic, creating a more detailed, multifaceted images of the appearances of bullying, its deeper, more intricate effects on students who are victims of it, and the intervention terrain college educators are having to navigate. Filled with student experiences and teacher attitudes, the research offers four interconnected critical gaps needed to effect effective response: (1) the transitional gap, which is lack of context in the processes of higher education under the illusion of age-related deterioration; (2) the contextual gap, which is the over-reliance on Western-centric models that are not always capable of describing the local cultural, social and institutional reality; (3) the methodological gap, which is the lack of a qualitative inquiry that will describe rich and subjective experiences, not only in terms of numerical information; and (

By the means of this multidimensional investigation, the study can be applied to theory and practice. It not only theoretically tests and, possibly, expands the frames of bullying, by looking at how they apply to a non-Western higher education setting. In practice, it offers evidence-based elements that might be used to shape institutional policies, educator training programs, student support services, and preventive measures that are explicitly organized concerning the specifics of Pakistani universities. Finally, this study is also a significant step in creating safer, more welcoming, and supportive educational settings that will allow every member of the university community to succeed both in their academic and personal life and not to experience victimization and aggression.

2. Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the nature, forms and experienced lives of bullying victimization on students in higher education institutions in Punjab, Pakistan.
2. To explore psycho-social, emotional, and academic effects of bullying perceived by the university students.
3. The purpose of the study is to determine and examine the awareness, intervention, and perceived barriers encountered by university teachers in the prevention and management of incidences of bullying.
4. To extract evidence-based suggestions on institutional policy, educator training and support mechanisms specific to the Pakistani higher education setting.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Participants

The qualitative study used phenomenological method to comprehend the nature of bullying experiences of students and a simple qualitative design to examine strategies of intervention used by teachers. The sample size was 75 participants selected out of five universities located in Punjab (Punjab University, University of Education Jauhrabad, Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan, Ripha International University Faisalabad and University of Lahore Sargodha Campus). The sample size consisted of 50 students (balanced in term of gender, discipline and year of study) of the university and 25 teachers (lecturers, assistant professors, associate professors and professors).

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data with separate protocols used with students and teachers. Student interviews examined experiences, manifestations, effects, and coping strategies of bullying. Awareness, intervention strategies, challenges, and policy recommendations were explored in teacher interviews. Thematic analysis in accordance with the framework of Braun and Clarke (2022) was used, and the data was coded and analyzed through the NVivo software. The Social-Ecological Model was the tool used in the analysis of the results at individual, relational, institutional, and societal levels.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

4.1 Prevalence and Manifestations of Bullying.

The research study found out that 58.7 %of students said that they had been bullied in their university life, and 29.3 % had said that they had participated in bullying. This statistic provokes the age-decline myth and indicates that bullying is a normalized part of university culture to a considerable percentage of people.

The competitive university environment (80%) was determined by teachers as the main factor driving force with bullying being a common weapon of creating social dominance. Non-physical psychological aggression (88%) was the most commonly reported (verbal harassment, social exclusion and manipulation of relationships). Cyber-bullying has become a specific and widespread menace, 84% of teachers have reported that cyber-bullying has been extended outside the campus using digital devices.

4.2 Effects on Student Well-being

Students and teachers spoke of extreme results of bullying:
- Immediate effect 92% teachers, 84% students indicated psychological and emotional distress as the most immediate effect.
- Several academic effects were seen such as poor performance (72% of students) and dropout of academic activities.
- 64% of teachers and 70.7% of students were observed to be socially isolated.
- 41.3% of students reported physical manifestations of stress.
- Students with eroded trust and self-worth were 77.3% of the students.

The information unveils the obvious domino effect: the psychological distress will result in academic disengagement followed by the social isolation, which will then increase victimization, forming a vicious circle.

4.3 Gaps in institutional Response and Intervention.

Another key observation was the institutional response systemic failure:
- 80 percent of students said they never attended any anti-bullying program organized by the university.
- 68% of students did not know of particular university programs that dealt with bullying.
- 70.7% of the students said that they were not sure whether they would tell teachers or staff about bullying.
- 76 percent of teachers viewed university as being bureaucratic and slow in their handling.

Speaking to both parties (52%), going to higher authorities (especially when presented with cyber-bullying cases) and relying on current policies were the main intervention options of teachers. The reason is that however, they indicated that there were serious challenges such as training deficiency, inadequate protocols, and administrative support.

4.4 recommendations made by students and teachers.

Both camps stressed the necessity of system reform:

- One of the recommendations that a majority of students gave was mandatory training of everyone in the university community.
- 81.3 percent of students stressed on comprehensive education programs.
- 82.7 percent of students insisted on having open and confidential mental care.
- 88 percent of the teachers recommended that every complaint should be taken seriously and required mandatory training.
- Three-quarters (76) of the teachers demanded clear and well-communicated policies that have a transparent process.

5. Discussion

The results prove that bullying continues in higher education but it undergoes a dramatic change. Instead of subsiding, it is more psychologically advanced and computers enabled. The prevalence rate of 58.7 percent matches with the findings from global studies that indicate that bullying is present in about a third of college students (Menesini and Salmivalli, 2017), which does not support the age-decline hypothesis. The hierarchies, social capital, and online literacy that define bullying in universities redefine power disparities found at the heart of bullying definitions as power is no longer determined by physical strength. This correlates with more recent research by Mendoza et al. (2023) that defines forms of higher education bullying as a form of instrumental incivility that is justified in a competitive academic setting. Cyber-bullying proved to be especially harmful because of its ubiquitous, anonymous and publicly increasing character. The statements by students that it destroys safe spaces (78.7) and facilitates extreme cruelty (65.3) are consistent with the literature that notes the special affordances of digital platform harassment (Zhu et al., 2024). The propensity of teachers to overstate cyber-bullying incidents due to the complexity of the law is an indication of institutional ill-equipment to cyber-bullying in the digital era. The obvious association between academic disengagement and psychological distress is an empirical proof that peer victimization is related to poor academic performance (Furnham, 2021). Using the perspectives of General Strain Theory (Agnew, 1992), bullying is a persistent stressor that results in adverse affective states that reduce academic capacities. The presented high levels of reported mental health problems resonate with the larger problem of student well-being in Pakistani higher education (Tsilmak et al., 2020). The most impressive insight is the deep lack of connection between prevalence of bullying and institutional response. The fact that only 80 percent of students participated in anti-bullying programs means that the system is not focused on this problem. The lack of trust of students towards reporting and the attitude of teachers on the ineffectiveness of bureaucracy show the institutional culture that unwillingly safeguards the murderers instead of the victims.

6. Conclusion

This work convincingly disproves the myth which states that bullying is a phenomenon of childhood. Bullying is not a new phenomenon in Pakistani universities, but it is an epidemic that has serious effects on the well-being of students, their academic performance and integrity within the university. The study presents an altered paradigm of bullying with mental intricacy and internet empowerment, working in a culture of institutional inattention.

The results are a worrying depiction of system failure: even though prevalence rates and effects are high and devastating, universities do not have extensive policies, training policies and support systems. Students and teachers both seem to be operating in this terrain with few resources and institutional support resulting in underreporting, ineffective intervention, and reinforcement of bad behaviors.

The research highlights that to resolve the issue of bullying in universities, it is necessary to understand that it can be quite unique when it comes to the university environment. It does not

only represent a continuation of school yard bullying, but is a multifaceted phenomenon that is closely associated with academic competition, social processes, and digital culture. Strong responses should therefore be differentiated to these distinctive features.

This study ends up being a desperate appeal to the Pakistani institutions of higher learning. The registered effects on the health and academic success of students are not isolated tragedies but institutional crises with more general consequences on the quality of education and social growth. To solve this silent epidemic, it is necessary to move beyond ad-hoc response to systematic evidence-based intervention based on the realities of the Pakistani university situation.

7. Recommendations

7.1 To the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan:

1. This should be a binding order to all HEC recognized universities to come up and use elaborate policies concerning Anti-Bullying, Harassment, and Respectful Conduct Policies that have clear definitions, reporting, and repercussions.

2. Create national standards of campus climate and mandate universities to disclose anonymized data of bullying incidences as institutional performance assessments.

3. Produce and disseminate universal training resources and guidelines of best practice in prevention and intervention of bullying.

7.2 For University Leadership:

1. Establish superb confidential reporting channels that have guaranteed response time and public investigation process.

2. Introduce compulsory education of every constituent in the university:
   - Students: During orientation, Bystander Intervention and Digital Ethics modules.
   - Staff/ Faculty: Workshops on identification and reporting on sexual misconduct and support services annually.
   - Administrative Staff: Disclosure protocol schooling.

3. Categorically include counseling services as part of anti-bullying programs and initiate de-stigmatization campaigns to make their services acceptable.

7.3 For Academic Departments:

1. Integrate classroom climate management in faculty education and instruction.

2. Assign liaisons of Student Welfare in departments to informally assist and to guide.

3. Include the aspects of academic honesty, decency in discussions and citizenship in the curriculum.

7.4 For Student Affairs:

1. Establish and finance peer-support groups of trained student volunteers.

2. Make anti-bullying resources and reporting systems always visible at every communication outlet on campus.

3. Conduct frequent awareness programs in different formats (workshops, social media, orientation programs).

8. Future Research Recommendations.

1. Carry out mass quantitative surveys of Pakistani universities to determine the prevalence rates of the problem statistically and to determine the high-risk groups and settings.

2. Use longitudinal designs to trace long time effects of university bullying on career paths and well-being of the grown-ups.

3. Explore gender and ethnicity and socioeconomic status-based intersection of bullying in Pakistani higher education.

4. Develop and test intervention programs that are culture-specific to the Pakistani setting, including bystander programs and digital literacy programs.

5. Discuss comparative case analysis of universities that have successful anti-bullying systems in order to determine the best practices that could be transferred to the Pakistani situation.

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