



RESEARCH PAPER

Behind the Blackboards: Prevalence and Impact of Bullying among Teachers in Public Schools of Lahore

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the prevalence and impact of workplace bullying among public school teachers in Lahore, Pakistan. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to collect insights from the public-school teachers who were selected through purposive sampling technique. Questions were related to the prevalence of bullying among school teachers and its impact on the victims. Through the use of thematic analysis technique, two major themes were identified: Verbal bullying and consequences for the victim. Subthemes of verbal bullying included uncomfortable jokes about personal characteristics and personal life, sexist remarks, name calling, teasing comments, narrative building and indirect bullying. The second theme "consequences for the victims" demonstrated the unwanted consequences which included mental health challenges such as stress, anxiety, sleep issues, job burnout and lack of focus on professional responsibilities. Further research work in different settings is needed for a comprehensive understanding of the prevalence of bullying at educational workplaces is needed. Adoption of anti-bullying programs by the management at school level is also suggested for the improvement of the situation.

KEYWORDS Bullying Perpetration, Consequences of Bullying, Impact of Bullying, Teachers, Workplace Bullying

Introduction

Bullying at workplace is a form of aggressive behavior within office environment which involves the repetitive negative actions by one or more persons (also called perpetrators) against one or more than one person where the perpetrators have more power than the targeted party (Einarsen et al., 2003). Bullying at workplace can take many forms of aggression including physical, psychological and verbal. It can exist in the form of work-related mistreatment like intense or additional scrutiny of the victim's tasks. It can involve personal attacks which include social exclusion or criticism of target's dressing or outlook. On physical level, things might get worse as shoving and aggressive pointing have been reported previously by the victims (Einarsen et al., 2009; Kennedy, 2020). It is important to note that bullying should not be confused with organizational conflict that happens between workers at an organization as bullying is a systematic attack by the aggressor against a person or a group (Hoel et al., 1999).

Traditionally, bullying has been associated with the student population. However, it is now widely recognized that adults also face bullying within their professional realms. That bullying at the workplace comes with negative consequences for the person at the receiving end (Della, & Dapieve, Kurniawan, Sutanti, & Nuryana,

2022: Pimentel, 2020: Pursell, 2020). Although, the literature that focuses on bullying among school going population is large in amount as compared to the literature that is dedicated to the experiences of adults with the workplace bullying, the amount of literature on the bullying among adults is not small in number which signifies the increasing recognition of issue of adult bullying among researchers and scholars. This study is focused on the phenomenon of bullying among school teachers.

Literature Review

A brief review of existing literature on bullying and its effects on victim and organizational productivity is presented in the narration to come. Literature about personality traits and characteristics of bullies and victims is also summarized under separate headings.

Workplace Bullying and Stress

Research efforts that have been made previously to explore workplace stress and similar concepts have concluded that any kind of conflict or negative relationship between colleagues at a workplace lead to stress which in turn comes with negative outcomes that include but are not limited to poor mental health of worker, lack of workers' well-being and job burnout which ultimately result in loss of productivity (Cullinan, Hodgins, Hogan, & Pursell, 2020). Studies in school settings have reported that many school teachers are exposed to multiple stress factors. They are reported to be under huge stress due to their hectic workday and tough job description. In an earlier study by Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1978), it was explained that teachers are exposed to two kind of factors including mental and physical factors which can keep them under consistent stress (Kennedy, 2020). Other researches (Owusu, 2021: Suleman, Khattak, & Hussain, 2021). in the literature indicated that overwork, lack of appreciation, low professional status and insufficient pay were also reported to be stress causing factors for the school teachers.

The literature suggests that those who are bullied at their offices, live in consistent stress as both bullying and stress in the victim are correlated (Ghofur, 2022: Kurniawan, Sutanti, & Nuryana, 2022: Pimentel, Della, & Dapieve, 2020). It has also been reported that a large number of workers who are bullied at their workplace have reported unrest and other mental health issues (Luo et al., 2022). The victims of bullying have reported serious consequences of mistreatment at the workplace in various studies. Those unwanted consequences include depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, insomnia, poor gut health, nervousness, helplessness, social phobias and suicidal thoughts (Mikkelsen, Hansen, Persson, Byrgesen & Høgh, 2020). Other research efforts of bullying concluded that those who are targeted and bullied are likely to face many issues including lack of trust for other people due to which they always doubt people. It has also been reported that victims of bullying at the workplace can have low emotional control which is demonstrated in their emotional responses (Camodeca & Nava, 2022).

Bullying and Organizations

Bullying at workplace or mistreatment at workplace might sound like issues of individual concerns but factually speaking, these phenomena can negatively affect the performance and profitability of an organization. Research on workplace bullying and its effects is full of evidence against the unwanted consequences of poor working environment and workplace politics, as disturbed and unhappy employee can not perform his/her duties with full focus and attention (Ishrat, 2013). That lack of focus

which comes due to mistreatment by some colleagues ultimately hinders the organizational success as organizational success depends on the productivity of the workers within an organization and that productivity is achieved only in optimal working conditions where every worker feels respected and valued and is treated with dignity (Brief & Weiss, 2002).

Organizations where workplace environment and disciplined is not controlled are responsible for the bullying and its unwanted consequences for the victim. Research has demonstrated previously that organizations where management has strong control over the discipline within the organization and has clear instructions for ethics of interpersonal communication between the workers rarely report the issues like bullying, job burnout and lack of job satisfaction among the employees (Valentine, Fleischman, & Godkin, 2015). These studies highlighted the significant association between bullying and various organizational variables. Those variables include leadership style and managerial style within an organization, web of social relations within organizations, type of work and work-related stress (Hoel, Glaso, Hetland, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2010). Organizations where satisfaction of employees is ignored can be less productive which should be understood as a true loss (Brief & Weiss, 2002).

Traits of Bullies and Victims

Literature that is dedicated to explore the characteristics and traits of bullying perpetrators was also scrutinized for the current research work. Various studies (Kauppi & Porhola, 2012; Linton & Power, 2013; Randal, 2002; Seigne, Coyne, Randall & Parker, 2007; Zapf, & Einarsen, 2020) have identified different characteristics of bullies. De Cieri, Sheehan, Donohue, Shea, and Cooper (2019) defined the characteristics of bullying perpetrators. In that study, it was asserted that bullies are generally those who have fears and have lack of self-beliefs. They try to compensate for their shortcomings and weaknesses by trying to humiliate others. The researchers also narrated bullies to be hypocritical, jealous and overcontrolling people who try to dominate others all the time. It was also reported that bullying perpetrators are intolerant to differences with others and they keep on trying to humiliate others in order to overcome or tackle their own competencies.

Baltas (2003) in his study of teacher's bullying experiences and other variables, he also explored the characteristics of victims of bullying. He reported that highly talented people are prone to bullying attacks by their workplace colleagues as creative, competent and successful people are perceived as threat by many at the workplace who out of insecurities, try to humiliate those talented people. It was also narrated that victims generally are decent people who are not familiar with workplace politics. They have good will and they trust their colleagues. They are highly professional and devote their attention to their work. As they are typically decent, they are unfamiliar with the appropriate ways to respond to bullies. Resultantly, they are attacked again and again as they are perceived as easy targets. These characteristics of victims of bullying are well documented in other studies with similar research objectives (Moura, Cruz & Quevedo, 2011; Nielsen & Knardahl, 2015; Randal, 2002; Zapf, & Einarsen, 2020:).

Material and Methods

This present study investigated workplace bullying among school teachers of public schools in Lahore, Pakistan. The data was collected through qualitative interviews with an intention to understanding the teachers' experiences with bullying and workplace mistreatment.

Sampling

The study selected participants through a purposive sampling technique. This technique involves selecting participants with specific characteristics that are relevant to the research question. In the present research, participants were school teachers from public schools of Lahore who had reported facing bullying at their workplace. Participants were approached for the interviews when they were attending a training session for teachers which was organized by a renowned national NGO. Details of the NGO are not disclosed as confidentiality was promised while seeking permission for the data collection. Individual participants were approached by the researchers during the break sessions. Teachers were informed about the objectives of the research. Only those were included in the study as participants who agreed to be the interviewees.

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was developed while keeping in view the objectives of the study. Flexibility was kept in view during development of the interview guide in order to explore the potential unexpected responses. The interview guide included questions about the prevalence, nature and impact of bullying. Interviews were audio-recorded with the informed consent of the study participant. All interviews were audio-recorded with the informed consent of the participants. The recordings were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview transcripts. This method involved identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. After the familiarization phase, the recordings were transcribed verbatim for analysis. Codes were then identified in the data. During that phase, it was found that all the codes that were identified could be categories in 2 broader themes. The broad themes were related to forms of bullying and consequences of bullying for the victims. Finally, several subthemes were identified for each broader theme.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical research principles were followed during the whole research journey. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured to make the participants comfortable. The data was stored in a secure manner and only was only used for research purposes.

Results and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess the prevalence of bullying and its types among public schools' teachers as well as its consequences for them. 19 teachers participated in this research. It was found that the phenomenon of bullying prevails among teachers in the public schools. Participants of this research reported that they face some form of bullying from their colleagues. They also reported some negative effects of bullying. The researchers founded 2 broad themes including "Verbal Form" and "Consequences for the Victim" after the detailed analysis of the data. Several subthemes were also explored for each of the 2 broader themes. Details are narrated hereunder.

Verbal Form

It is important to note that bullying among teachers is limited to verbal forms. No participant in the study reported any form of physical bullying at the workplace. It was mainly because people can get away with jokes, teasing etc., but any kind of physical attack to hurt someone can result in strict actions by the school and education department. Questions were asked from the interview guide but probe questions were asked to know in details about the nature of verbal bullying. Verbal bullying that was reported by the study participants can be in different forms which are discussed in detail in the narration to come.

Uncomfortable Jokes about Personal Characteristics. Jokes about personal characteristics that can make the person at the receiving end uncomfortable are commonly experienced by the victims on regular basis. Jokes about personal characteristics refer to jokes about one's skin color, height, weight, physical appearance or facial features etc. 16 participants in the study reported to experience jokes about their personal characteristics. Participant 1 said, "I am a short guy, everyone jokes about my height. Sometimes it sounds fine but it hurts when someone says it in front of other people". Participant 2 reported, "As a fat person, I have been listening to jokes about my body since my childhood. I got habitual because it was very common for people to tease on my weight. But you have different expectations when you join a workplace, especially in school setting because you expect to work among mature people who can understand people's emotions. It was a setback when I started facing similar behavior from colleagues around me in academic settings which I used to face at the college".

Participant 6 said, "I am joked about my skin color. I being a brown girl gives other girls a chance to joke about my complexion because it is not white". Participant 4 said, "My bigger nose is a source of fun for some of my colleagues". Similar experiences were reported by other participants of this study. Participant 4, 11 and 13 reported that making such jokes is a common practice among colleagues who share common workplaces and are a bit informal in their interaction. Majority of the participants including number 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15. 16 reported such jokes as a negative because it can have negative consequences for the receiver.

Jokes about Personal Life. During the interviews, it was reported by 11 participants that they experience jokes about the personal lives which was reported as unpleasant by the victims. Several kinds of unpleasant experiences in this regard were reported. Participant 7 informed that she consistently faced jokes about her family life. She said, "I was brought up by my mother as my father did not work throughout his life. Mistakenly, I somehow shared that with my close colleagues sometime in the past, I have been joked about the idleness of my father multiple times". On probing, the participant 7 reported further that once when she was apparently idle at her workstation, a close colleague of mine said "Uncle g par chali gai hy" which means "You are like you father (idle and who does nothing)". Participant 7 reported such jokes to be very unpleasant.

Sexist Remarks. Majority of female participants reported that they have to face sexist remarks as it is a common myth that women are not as sensible as men are. Participant number 6, 7, 12, 14 and 17 reported that they keep on listening to jokes from their male colleagues which are meant to expose women as less intelligent beings. Participant 12 and 14 reported that the one who cracks such jokes usually does that just for the sake of fun, sometimes without even knowing that such jokes irritate the female on the receiving end. Participant 6 said, "Sexist remarks are often listened at our workplace by the colleagues but not everyone is offended by those remarks. Some females on the receiving end sometimes enjoy the light humor but for some, such remarks can be a cause of distress. I personally don't like sexist jokes and comments".

Participant 7 informed, "Being a working female who worked very hard to be on that position, I hate any narrative that is intended to make fun of abilities of women to perform difficult things. I have noticed that sometimes, such narratives are used to dominate us".

Name calling. Participant number 1, 2, 4, 13, 14, 15 and 16 reported that they are sometimes called with the derogating names. Majority of the participants (number 14) who have been given nick names were males. Only one female participant reported the case of nick name. Participant 2 said, "I am known as Kala due to my dark complexion". He smiled while reporting that. Participant 1 and 13 informed that nick names can be amusing if the given tag is not derogatory. On probing, participant 1 said, "If you call some a lion, that is a moment of pride but if you call someone a donkey, it cannot be a pleasant experience". Participant 15 reported that he is called "Chadu" (someone who shares illogical information) for being outspoken. He said, "I no more speak extra in front of my colleagues as some of them will start bullying me. They didn't like my communication skills so they started attacking me through such a stupid nick name". He also informed that he does not file a complaint because that will cause the bullies to give him another nick name like "Darpok" (Urdu word for fainthearted) because brave people face bullies rather than complaining with the authorities. Participant 16 informed that such behavior from the bullying colleagues is tolerated as the majority consider it normal.

Teasing comments. Teasing was also reported by the participants from both genders. Participant 17 informed that seniors sometimes tease when they think that the subordinate has not accomplished the given goal. Participant 17 said, "My senior repeatedly says that it is not my cup of tea because it (given task) cannot be completed while having laziness". Participant 6 informed that sometimes, a person can be teased even if that person has completed the given task. Participant 6 said informed that when she recently submitted a report to the senior, she responded with a teasing comment by saying, "You must have got some help from somewhere because you yourself cannot complete that". She also said that sometimes, even when the work is done properly, the senior can tease about delayed submission.

Participant 17 informed that both seniors and subordinates can make teasing comments. Participant 5 said, "The purpose of teasing by a colleague is usually to trigger anger and frustration in the person at the receiving end. I face it on regular basis even from friends like colleagues. It happens". Participant 4 informed, "I am often teased by some colleagues for being punctual and regular as my punctuality and routine is used by the management as a reference. Resultantly, they tease me for that as they think that I am closer to the principal". The word "Teasing" was used by other participants as well while they were explaining the experiences of workplace bullying.

Narrative building and indirect bullying. It was reported by several participants that bullies at work place use indirect bullying through narrative building techniques against the person who is bullied. In order to hurt or disturb a colleague, a bully at workplace can use his/her connections in the office. The bully will spread wrong information about the target and in result the third person or the group of persons who is not directly involved in the interaction between the bully and the victim will also start either teasing or inappropriately joking the targeted person. Participant 8 said, "I have never ever had attitude problems but one of my colleagues who doesn't like me because I do now laugh on his stupid jokes inside the office now spreads information about my arrogance in the office". Participant 19 said, "People who are not in my department tease me about me being late. The fact of the matter is I have been a punctual employee since my joining but someone is building a negative narrative around me".

Participant 17 informed that negative people at workplace can bully the victim in indirect way with the help of their friends at the workplace. On probing, she informed that such kind of bullying involves the kind of game play with the target's reputation. She said, "When they cannot directly hurt you, they start playing games with you by ruining your reputation and involving others in a game against you (or victim)". Narrative building by the bullying colleagues through the involvement of other people at workplace was reported by other participants as well including participant number 3, 4, 7, 11, 12 and 13.

Consequences for the Victim

Bullying or any form of victimization at workplace was reported to be a negative phenomenon that carry unwanted consequences for the person at the receiving end. A vast majority (17) of respondents from both genders reported that any form of mistreatment turns out to be highly damaging to their motivation to work and mental health. Only 2 male participants said that teasing, joking and even workplace politics have no consequences. Negative effects of workplace bullying are narrated hereunder with supporting narratives from the participants.

Intimidating, Hurting and Insulting. Participant 4 who reported the acts of bullying by the colleagues as a result of his punctuality said, "Jokes about my punctuality and good routine sound intimidating and insulting as such treatment makes me think about the attentions of a few people about me". Participant 15 reported, "Being nicknamed at workplace is the worst experience some one can have. It hurts allot and I feel insulted due to weird nickname". Participant 6 and 7 also reported that they are hurt after insulting comments and remarks.

Stress and Mental Health Problems. Participant 3, 5, 6,8,10 and 11 reported that any kind of peer victimization at the workplace causes stress in them. Participant 3 said, "You cannot respond violently to bullies at workplace so you have to bear it but it damages you from within". Participant 10 said, "Too much of that stuff can cause consistent stress". Participant 11 said, "Teasing comments from the boss is highly stressful. The worst part is that you cannot actually do much about it. It hinders my ability to work properly". Participant 6 and 8 responded that they sometimes feel like they are feeling problems of mental health including depression. They also said that the stress caused by poor treatment at workplace is consistent and the mistreatment keeps on haunting them even when they are at home or on vacations. Participant 5 also informed about the mental health related consequences of bullying. He said, "It can cause mental sickness among some victims as not everyone can bear improper behavior". Participant 13 said, "Insulting nick names can affect the psychological health of the person at the receiving end. Jokes should not be a source of pain for anyone".

Sleeplessness. Some of the respondents including participants 2 and 15 informed that they sometimes find it difficult to fall asleep at time due to stress that is caused by disrespecting and humiliating nick names at the office. Participant 2 said, "I am not what I am called. My problem is that I do not respond out of fear of more disrespect and mistreatment. Resultantly, I keep on remembering those events of disrespect, sometimes throughout the night". Participant 15 said, "I have symptoms of depression and sleeplessness due to regular bullying with a nickname".

Diversion of Focus on Work. Mistreatment by colleagues at workplace can divert the focus of people at the receiving end from their work. Many participants including participant number 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14 and 17 reported that their focus on work is

effected due to the interaction that takes place at the school. Participant 3 reported, "Teaching requires focus. You cannot focus on whatever you are supposed to do when you are teased". Participant 6 said, "You can either think about tackling toxic people or your work. You can rarely do both at same time with efficiency". Participant 8 said, "A person on whom other people laugh will not work with full attention". Participant 9 informed, "It can keep me away from my job-related activities, even for days. It surely effects my productivity at work". While the statement by participant number 14 was, "I think I am no more an interesting teacher due to lack of my enthusiasm".

Effect on Personal Life. Majority of the respondents informed that any form of bullying that is directed towards them can have indirect negative consequences for the personal life. A few male participants including participant number 5, 8 and 16 told that their family members sometimes have to face the anger from them that they carry throughout the day due to burnout from mistreatment. Participant 6 reported, "As a mother, I have domestic responsibilities as well. Thoughts of workplace bullying sometimes hinder my ability to complete different tasks at home". Participant 10 told, "Stress from the office cannot only effect the focus on work but also focus in personal life".

Feelings of Helplessness. Despite being consistently targeted, the victims of the bullying find it very difficult to seek help from anyone. Many participants reported that they feel helpless in this regard. Majority of the participants reported that they do not expect help from anyone at the office. Participant 1 said, "What can you do when your senior is disrespectful? You have to bear that as no one can help you". Participant 4 informed helplessness in these words, "I feel helpless. There is no one who I truly think can help me. They can only help the bullies". Participant 7 said, "You can neither complain to your boss nor to someone at your home. You don't anyone to think that you are not strong enough to defend yourself". Participant 17 reported, "I do not think that anyone can help in this regard by stopping someone from mistreating you. No one does that on your behalf".

Disliking for the Workplace. Participant 2, 5, 8, 10, 11, 16 and 19 reported their dislike for the school as a work place. "I do not like the school as a workplace. Nothing including the infrastructure and people is impressive". Participant 2 said, "People who are mocked do not like their workplace". Participant 5 said, "I am still continuing my job because I need it. There is no other way around. I think it happens with many people as they have to bear the toxic workplace due to personal compulsions". Participant 16 used the statement, "Majority of my colleagues do not like the school as a workplace. Credit goes to the group of a few bullies who have spoiled the overall environment at the school".

Lowers Self-Esteem and Self-Respect. Bullying can lower the self-esteem of the person at the receiving end. Participant number 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, and 19 reported that mistreatment by the colleagues at the workplace lowers one's self-respect and self-esteem. Participant 1 said, "I am regularly teased and joked about my skin color. They have given me a nick name. I feel insulted and it effect myself esteem". Participant 6 also reported lower self-respect due to the bullying on skin colour. Participant 7 said, "Sexist comments make me feel like I am some inferior creature. It has lowered my self-esteem". Participant 8 told, "A reason for effected mental health is actually the lower self-esteem". Participant 19 said, "When a whole bunch of colleagues are involved in disrespecting you, it challenges your self-respect. It is not a situation which someone can wish to face". Participant 11 said, "A person who has lower self-esteem cannot be a leader at his workplace".

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of school teachers with workplace bullying and the consequences which they have to face. Qualitative research design was used. Purposive sampling technique was employed to select the interviewees from a teachers' training session. It was revealed by the teachers that they face bullying in verbal form by their colleagues and seniors. The participants reported a range of negative behaviors which included different forms of harassment and psychological aggression. This study contributes to the literature that is dedicated to the exploration of prevalence of bullying in professional settings.

It is important to note that the verbal bullying prevails as a more common form of workplace mistreatment. This finding of the current research work is aligned with the existing literature which suggest that psychological attacks are more frequent than any form of physical violence or harassment (Ferri, Silvestri, Artoni & Lorenzo, 2016; Ibiloglu, 2020). Here, it can be argued that absence of physical violence among colleagues at the workplace can be associated with the fear of retaliation or report to the higher authorities. Another perspective which is emerging here is that that verbal bullying is used more frequently to harm a victim at psychological and emotional level. This study highlighted in detail the kind of verbal assault which was reported by the teachers.

Verbal forms of bullying included uncomfortable jokes about personal characteristics and personal life, sexist remarks, name calling, teasing comments along with the narrative building and indirect bullying. Sub themes of a major theme "Verbal Bullying" including uncomfortable jokes about personal characteristics and personal life, sexist remarks, name calling and teasing comments verify the results from other studies (Ibiloglu, 2020; Quinn, 2000) on workplace mistreatment, workplace bullying and related concepts. It is however, noteworthy that the phenomenon that were reported in the current study as "narrative building" and "indirect bullying" were unique and are a contribution to the existing pool of literature regarding workplace bullying and mistreatment.

The consequences of bullying that were reported by the school teachers are aligned with the findings of other studies on workplace bullying (Einarsen: Quinn, 2000, & Raknes, 1997). Results from this study have demonstrated the impact mistreatment at the workplace on teachers' psychological health, job satisfaction and well-being. The reported feelings of helplessness, stress, insult and disliking for the workplace are concerning because as per existing literature (Araneta, 2022; Ozsungur, 2020), they hinder teachers' ability to do effectively what they are supposed to do at the office. Feelings of lower self-esteem and self-respect were also reported by the participants which draws attention to the need of intervention on this matter as teachers who are considered to be the constructors of a society should be placed at the workplaces that are good for their well-being.

Conclusion

Generally, bullying is considered to be a phenomenon that happens among the students but this research has demonstrated that it can also happen in the professional spheres. School teachers who represent a highly qualified segment of any population group can also involve themselves in bullying perpetration and can negatively affect the mental health of their colleagues. This study can be concluded with an argument that the issue of bullying among school teachers should be considered a serious threat to teachers' mental health and needs to be addressed as a decent work environment improves the teachers' well-being and supports the enhancement of overall quality of education for the students.

Recommendations

Further research should be focused on exploration of bullying among teachers in different settings. Apart from that, introduction of anti-bullying policies by the school management and staff satisfaction surveys by the independent third parties can help in the prevention of bullying among at the schools.

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