

Understanding teacher's perspectives related to Violence against Children in Schools

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Abstract

Introduction: Children need to be protected from all forms of violence in schools. Teachers can play a very important role in early identification, management, and referrals. However, for this, it is important to understand teachers' perspectives related to violence against children.

Objectives: The objective of the study is to identify to explore teachers' own experiences related to violence, identify factors contributing to violence against children in schools, and identify gaps in system development and training according to teachers' perspectives.

Materials and Methods: Data was collected via focus group discussion which included note taking and participant observation during discussion. 8 government school teachers (6 males and 2 females) from primary level to high secondary levels from Sheikhpura district participated in the research.

Results: Analysis of the discussion revealed that violence against children is still very common in schools, including harsh psychological and physical punishment and bullying. Some of the factors contributing to violence against children include the influence of the intergenerational cycle of violence, inadequate support, classroom management issues such as high strength of students, and how teachers felt there was no formal training given to them related to issues such as prevention of child abuse and neglect, positive disciplining in school settings.

Conclusion: This study indicates that the teachers should be aware of school and child psychology, mental health awareness, consequences of corporal punishment along with aspects such as the intergenerational cycle of violence, and there needs to be a more systemic approach to protecting students in schools against violence.

Keywords: Violence against children, corporal punishment, intergenerational cycle of abuse, consequences of abuse, teachers, safe to learn, end violence.

Introduction

Children need to be protected from harm in all settings. A child spends most of the day in his/her school. A school needs to be provided with a safe, conducive, and enabling environment so that they can learn and grow. They need to be protected against all forms of violence including child physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, and bullying. Violence against children is also perpetrated by peers including physical and emotional violence.¹

Pakistan has signed and ratified the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which makes it obligatory for children to be protected from all sorts of violence and neglect. Pakistan also has a number of laws and legislation pertaining to the rights of children and child protection including The Criminal Law (Second Amendment) Act, 2016 and the Sindh Prohibition of Corporal Punishment Act 2016.²

Looking at the INSPIRE Strategies and the need to work for ending violence, Pakistan is not adequately equipped to protect its children. There is a lot of work required in the implementation of law and legislation, change of general attitudes and awareness raising and creating systems for safe environments, parent and caregiver support, income and economic strengthening, education and life skills, and response and support services.³ There is a need for a systematic approach to tackling cases of violence against children, proper databases and safeguarding policies, and training of key stakeholders to work towards protecting children from violence.⁴

In Pakistan, there are different types of educational institutes such as government, non-government schools (private), technical educational centers, and religious institutes (madrassas) that provide their services differently as per child's age and grades. Teachers of these school systems showed different teaching styles and behaviors towards students as well as students also showed different educational behaviors that further developed motivation, self-belief, and drive to learn and experience new things in their lives.⁵

There have been cases that have been highlighted in media related to violence against children over the past few years.⁴ Khan and Amin identified the violence against children in school settings to be very common in Pakistani culture in which school teachers showed punitive behaviors toward students where they were reported to show their anger for no reason, most of the time. Physical violence and emotional abuse were highly reported in school settings where

teachers bullied pupils in a humiliating way and make them guilty in front of their classmates causing emotional distress in their lives.⁶ Teachers who bullied their students faced difficulty to manage their emotions later on and those students who experienced corporal punishment in their childhood showed multiple behavioral problems such as anger, fear, anxiety, and bullying others. Previous papers indicated that corporal violence caused a lack of socialization and difficulty to manage the interpersonal relationships with others.⁷ In a similar study with educational managers and parents, it was also seen that child abuse and neglect are regularly seen in Pakistani schools where physical abuse happened moderately and emotional abuse happened frequently.⁸

Teachers play a very important role in providing this safe space for their students. They are in a unique position to identify and comprehend what is going on in a child's life as they interact with him/her on a daily basis. While looking at 270 teachers from private, public, Islamic schools, and NGO-run school settings, it was seen that only 15% of teachers had previously received any formal training on child abuse and neglect.⁴ While most of them had received a reasonable qualification there were substantial gaps in knowledge related to child protection issues, especially in the areas of child physical abuse and sexual abuse.⁴ There is also a lack of awareness at various levels in schools about child sexual abuse.⁹ Most school teachers have no mental health awareness and they don't even know about emotional regulation.¹⁰

It is seen that violence against children may be a major cause of dropout of students and that harsh treatment including physical punishment is not an effective way to increase the student's compliance with completing tasks such as homework.¹¹ The current norms of society along with the intergeneration transmission of abuse can contribute to the acceptance of violence against children. Researches showed that the transmission of violence is stronger among teachers, parents, and children implying that parents and teachers who had an abusive childhood were more likely to show aggressive behavior to their children.¹²

Violence against children in schools is a major problem all over the world in which the child experienced punishment by their teachers that caused many short-term and long-term problems in children. Short-term consequences include emotional behavioral problems which further consist of; isolation, crying, sadness, lack of interest in studies, truancy, dropping out of school,

fear of teacher, poor academic performance, non-disciplining, and bullying. In the long-term problems, the child may experience anger, substance use, and lack of socialization, juvenile tendencies, and the child may not forget such experiences in their lives.¹³

The current study aimed to identify the teacher's perspectives on violence against children. The objectives of the study are:

- To explore teacher's own experiences related to violence in their childhood
- To identify factors contributing to violence against children in schools
- To identify gaps in improving school systems to protect children from violence

Materials and Methods

Participants:

A total of 8 government school teachers were selected from Sheikhpura District. All participants belonged to different schools spread across the district. The participants were 6 males and 2 females who were currently working as teaching professionals teaching from primary level to high secondary levels, with an experience of 15-25 years.

Data collection:

The main method of data collection was qualitative in nature with a focus group discussion. This included note-taking and participant observations against their responses.

Procedure:

Data was collected through focus group interview-based discussion that took approximately 40-50 minutes. To begin with, facilitators gave the participants a brief orientation about definitions and types of abuse that are usually highlighted in schools along with a briefing on ethical considerations including the right to leave, anonymity, and confidentiality. After explaining the initial information, facilitators asked the following open-ended questions and noted the participant's responses:

- What kind of issues related to violence against children did you see while you were growing up, as a child?
- What kind of issues related to violence against children do you now see in your everyday practice, as a teacher?
- How can we protect children in schools from violence?

Analysis:

Focus group discussion consisting of both qualitative and observational records that would be used

accordingly¹⁴ in which their note taking used to share their experiences. Through these focus group interviews, multiple themes were identified from their teachers and their childhood perspectives such as an intergenerational cycle of violence, consequences of violence, and causes of violence.

Results

Intergenerational Cycle of Violence:

Participants identified their personal childhood experiences have had an impact on their current personality, especially in their profession. A teacher reported that "humari teacher humay baghair kisi waja ke punish kerti thi aur class mien se nikaal deti thi aur kaan maroorti thi" (our teachers punished us without reason and sent us out of the class and used to pull our ears in the classroom). Whereas they also reported that the behavior they are showing to students is the reflection of their teachers who showed strict teaching styles in their childhood. The individual who had healthy childhood experiences reflects the same attitudes to the next generation. Most of the teachers shared their experiences that they had experienced emotional and physical violence from their teachers. One teacher reported, "meri teacher b bila waja saza deti thien aur sara din class k samne negative comments deti thy. Aur ab lgta hai k jese main b aisa hy behave krta hu apne student's k sath" (my teacher used to punish me without any particular reason and used to keep saying negative comments in front of the class. And now it feels like I behave in the same manner with my students).

Some teachers spoke about emotional punishment which they feel is transferred and is reflected via uncontrolled anger. For example, a teacher reported, "mujhy bohot jaldi gussa ajata hai jese meri aik teacher ko ata tha aur wo hmian dant'ti rehti thien" (I get angry very quickly just like one of my teachers who used to keep shouting at us).

Most of the teachers reported that they experienced corporal punishment, and physical violence in their childhoods such as "hitting, hair pulling, and hair cutting, slapping, ear pulling, and beating with sticks and cruel practices in and outside the classroom" which somehow caused for harsh teaching and parenting towards their own children and students. This supports the intergenerational cycle of violence which is transferred from one generation to the other. The discussion also revealed that there is no difference between male and female staff members as both are

showing the same level of violence against children in their classrooms and schools as well.

Forms of Violence in schools:

While most of them understood that hitting or physical punishment is not the solution, and with the slogan "maar nahi pyaar" (don't hit, only love) - a slogan which discourages corporal punishment, various forms of violence were shared by participants in their school settings. For example, a teacher reported, "aik teacher ne bachi k sar k baal jarh se ukhair dye" (a teacher pulled the hair out from the roots of a student) and another reported, "aik teacher ne sabaq na sunane ki waja se bachi k baal kat dye" (a teacher cut a girls hair because she had not learned her lesson), reflecting how physical punishments were not only limited to hitting the child with a stick only. Teachers also shared that emotional abuse via name calling, insulting behaviors, passing negative comments, asking the child to leave the classroom for long periods of time (to embarrass him/her) and discrimination along with bullying is also very common in their schools.

Understanding the consequence of violence in schools:

Most of the teachers showed a reasonable understanding of the consequence of various forms of violence in schools. For example, a teacher reported, "Jb bacho ko bachpan me saza milti hai to unk dil me sari zindagi k lye khof beth jata hai" (when a child gets punishment in his/her childhood, they have fear instilled in their heart for life). They also shared that adverse childhood experiences cause a lack of confidence and that the child doesn't know how to regulate his/her emotions properly in a productive way.

Factors related to Violence in schools:

While most of the teachers shared their perspectives related to the intergenerational cycle and how if an individual experienced violent behavior in his childhood there are more chances to repeat such behavior with pupils, there were some other factors that contributed to acts of violence. Reasons reported by school staff included "frustration, class strength, workload, staff internal rivalry, comparison among staff, low salary packages and other incentives that caused lack of motivation to work enthusiastically". One of the teachers stated that "teachers ko extra incentives na milai to wo fatigue ka shikar ho jaty hain"

(Teachers do not get any extra incentives (for overwork) and they become fatigued). Another stated that "relax kernay ke liyay koi extra holiday accept nahi hoti" (no extra holidays are accepted to get some relaxation time). Most of the teachers agreed that "aik

teacher ziada bacho ko handle nahi kr sakta jiski waja se wo ziada gussa krta hai" (one teacher cannot handle a lot of children which causes him/her to get angry very quickly).

Need for a systematic approach toward protecting children in schools:

While most teachers knew about the legal framework pertaining to ending corporal punishment, some of the teachers felt that this law and its awareness among students has only caused issues for them. For example, a teacher stated "bacho ko saza na dene wale law pass hone ki waja se bachy bat nahi manty to teachers phir kia krian" (due to the law pertaining to not punishing children, children do not listen to us so what can we do). They felt that a more holistic approach is needed which looks at various stakeholders (not just teachers) where teachers are facilitated. They stated that they struggle with their own stresses and there is no form of psychological help for staff members, which sometimes makes it hard to keep their own anger and frustrations in check.

They also reported not having any formal training related to identification and management of child abuse and neglect, positive disciplining, and general child rights frameworks. It was not included in their preservice or in-service teacher training. They also stated that they don't know what to do or where to refer a child who has been bullied or has faced violence at home or school and how a more systemic approach is needed to protect children in schools.

Discussion

Focus group discussion is a useful and adaptable technique of research that provides an opportunity to explore issues that are not well in the particular setting or society. Moreover, focus group discussion builds on group dynamics to explore issues in detail for conceptual clarity and to share their views in discussion. Through this focus group discussion, teachers shared their issues firstly lack of mental health awareness caused all kinds of problems in a school setting.

Secondly, this focus group discussion reflected how most teachers struggled with their personal childhood experiences and traumas which when unresolved also caused unsatisfactory class management. The intergenerational cycle plays an important role to develop a child and making a society productively same as most teachers share their own experiences that are the reason for their experiences.¹⁵

Thirdly, while teachers were aware of slogans and legal frameworks related to the use of corporal punishments, they felt that without much teacher support and a holistic & systematic way to deal with violence against children in schools, these only add to their challenges in the classroom management and their mental health issues. They also reported that there was little awareness or no formal training that they received as teachers related to violence against children, types of abuse, as well as its impact on child mental health and academic performances. Teacher training programs need to address issues related to the basics of child abuse and neglect along with how teachers can be equipped to detect and manage cases of child abuse and neglect in schools.¹⁶

This calls for a need for the development of child protection systems where the admin, teacher, parents, and students all work towards devising identification, management, and reporting systems, and a multidisciplinary, multi-sector approach needs to be taken to tackle violence against children in all settings, including schools.¹⁶

Conclusion

The current study provides basic and important information about the knowledge of school teachers on violence against children and how their own childhood experiences are relatable to the current situation in schools. This study shows how important it is to address and break the intergenerational cycle of violence for teachers by providing them psychological support, administrative support, and adequate training in child protection.

Recommendations

The current study found gaps in conceptualization that would be covered in the future and the following are high recommendations;

- Awareness sessions on violence against children in school should be taught including awareness sessions on child rights and violence against children.
- Early identification, prevention, and child psychology should be delivered to the staff.
- The staff should be taught about positive teaching styles and refresher courses to guide them to multiple techniques to manage a child.
- Teachers should remain in contact through parent-teacher meetings with pupils'

Parents/guardians and monitor students' friendship patterns and observe their changes in behaviors in the classroom and school.

- A systematic, multi-stakeholder approach to protecting children in schools from violence is needed in schools that focus on early detection, management, and referrals.

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