



## Examining the Prevalence of Bullying in Public Schools and Role of School Social Work in Addressing the Issue

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### ABSTRACT

*Bullying in schools can have detrimental effects on students' physical and psychological well-being, often resulting in long-lasting emotional scars. Addressing this issue is crucial in ensuring that school education remains a positive and nurturing experience for all students. Objectives of this study were to identify the prevalence of bullying in public schools, to analyse the bullying factor with the chance/risk of school dropout and to assess the prospects of school social work to solve the problem of bullying. The methodology of the study was based on convergent parallel design of mixed method approach. 47 male and 53 female students of grades 6 and 10 of public schools of Tehsil City, district Lahore were selected for quantitative research by using proportional stratified random sampling technique. Quantitative data was collected from the students and qualitative responses were gathered from the parents and teachers. Criteria for inclusion was poor grades and poor attendance of the students. Among a sample of 100 students, 36% indicated prevalence of bullying as a lot, while 43% reported that such behavior occurs sometimes. Of the surveyed students, 37% expressed fear of being bullying as a lot, while 35% disclosed that they experienced such fear sometimes. Binary logistic regression analysis indicates that students who face bullying in school has 1.31 times more chances to dropout from school as compared to those who do not face bullying. While qualitative data revealed that parents/teachers have neither resources, nor time or skills to deal with bullying in schools. This study proposes that education policy needs to acknowledge challenges faced by children and introduce school social work to help address these challenges.*



### Introduction

Bullying is a global issue that significantly impacts the overall atmosphere within schools and takes away students' basic right to feel safe and free from fear (Banks, 1997). School bullying refers to a situation where one student, known as the perpetrator, intentionally inflicts physical, verbal, or psychological harm on another student, who is the victim (Olweus, 1993). Types of bullying encompass direct actions like teasing, taunting, physical aggression, threats, and theft, along with more subtle forms of harm like social isolation and exclusion from social groups (Banks, 1997; Sharp et al., 2002), and spreading rumors (Sharp et al., 2002).

Bullying involves ongoing acts of harassment (Farrington, 1993) and the individual is consistently subjected to negative behaviors are bullied experience health issues (Gini & Pozzoli, 2013) including psychosomatic and psychosocial complaints (Fekkes et al., 2006). This results in heightened levels of anxiety,

depression, as well as phobias and panic disorders (Juvonen & Graham, 2014). In general, numerous factors contribute to school bullying, including the impact of family environment, shortcomings in the educational system, and the influence of wider society. (Haobo, 2021).

In Pakistan, usually, low-income families enroll their children in public schools, which offer free education but often encounter numerous issues (ADB, 2019). Students attending these schools frequently face challenges related to poverty, abuse, parental unwillingness, long commutes, poor education quality, unfavorable school conditions, overcrowded classrooms, and careless behavior of the teachers (Latif et al., 2015). Pakistan is experiencing a high dropout rate (ADB, 2019; alifailaan, 2017; Punjab Education Sector Reform Programme, 2019). Additionally, transition rate from primary to higher education is also low (ADB, 2019). School dropout can be attributed to a range of socio-economic factors, therefore, bullying in schools is one of the contributing factors that also leads to students leaving school prematurely (Masilo, 2018; Peguero, 2011; Townsend et al., 2008). Bullying can result in a fear of attending school, frequent absenteeism, and hindered academic advancement, all of which serve as early signs of school dropout (Townsend et al., 2008).

Students who experience bullying tend to achieve lower academic performance (Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010). The adverse link between experiencing bullying and academic success persists throughout middle and high school (Espinoza et al., 2013). Students who are victims of bullying experience serious consequences that deter them from attending school, and they make every effort to avoid it (Graham, 2016). Students may have connection with their parents or teachers, but they have reservations about whether these individuals can provide them with assistance (Berger, 2007). Likewise, in the school setting, teachers may have restrictions on their capacity to address bullying effectively (Berger, 2007).

Bullying among students in the school environment is a social problem, making it a matter of concern for social workers (Masilo, 2018). Social workers possess a specialized skill set, cultivated through their training, which enables them to address bullying effectively. Their knowledge of social dynamics equips them with a profound understanding of both perpetrators and victims of bullying, making them adept at developing evidence-based anti-bullying programs focused on behavioral change (Virginia Commonwealth University, 2022).

The field of school social work is an expanding specialization that is being practiced in more than 50 countries (Huxtable, 2022; UNICEF, 2022). School social workers offer support to children and aim to improve the surroundings for the child's benefit; to achieve this effectively, they collaborate with children, parents, teachers, schools, and communities (Dash & Mohan, 2015).

Social workers play a crucial and meaningful role in facilitating the implementation of anti-bullying policies and initiatives within a school environment (Masilo, 2018). Because a significant responsibility of school social workers is to discern and recognize children who are at risk. For instance, in the United States, school social workers have a crucial role in preventing and addressing bullying. They offer assistance to bullying victims, educate students involved in such behavior on positive social skills, and communicate with the parents of both the victims and the perpetrators. Additionally, they work on enhancing resilience in victims and fostering empathy in those displaying bullying behaviors (School Social Work Association of America, 2019).

This research is unique due to the absence of school social work intervention in Pakistan. It was once initiated in Pakistan during third five year plan (1965-70) (Rehmatullah, 2002), but no evidence is found that why those projects were closed. When considering the success of school social work in developed countries, it becomes evident that a similar approach with necessary adaptation could be valuable in addressing the challenges faced by Pakistani school children. This study will assess the prevalence of bullying behavior and concurrently assess the need for school social work in Pakistan.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To identify the prevalence of bullying in public schools.
2. To analyse the bullying factor with the chance/risk of school dropout.
3. To assess the prospects of school social work to solve the problem of bullying.

### **Literature Review**

Bullying within educational institutions represents a significant concern for public health and social justice. Bullying can result in enduring, detrimental consequences for all those involved, including the individuals who engage in bullying behavior and the victims (Bank, 1997).

A study conducted by Arseneault et al. (2010) revealed that bullying is linked to the development of severe mental health issues, such as self-harm, violent tendencies, and psychotic symptoms; moreover, its effects can endure and continue to impact individuals well into late adolescence. Similarly, another longitudinal study demonstrates that the inclination to engage in bullying during school years is a substantial

predictor of subsequent antisocial and violent conduct (Rigby, 2003).

Research carried out in secondary schools in Edo State revealed that the most prevalent form of bullying involved physical actions, such as having belongings taken or stolen (68.3%), being kicked, pushed, or locked indoors (52.2%), and facing threats (47.8%) (Ighaede-Edwards et al., 2023). The classroom, particularly when a teacher was not present, was the primary location for bullying (75%), with classmates being the main perpetrators according to the majority (58.3%) (Ighaede-Edwards et al., 2023). Findings also indicated that students in junior classes were 1.61 times more likely to experience bullying than those in senior classes, rural residents were 1.75 times more likely to be bullied compared to urban dwellers, and those who endured frequent parental beatings were 2.28 times more likely to engage in bullying (Ighaede-Edwards et al., 2023).

Family traits were identified as significant factor contributing to bullying behavior. Such as, the act of bullying others was significantly linked to family monthly income (Ighaede-Edwards et al., 2023). Lereya et al., (2013) found that negative parenting behavior is associated with a modestly heightened risk of a child becoming a bully or victim of bullying. Additionally, the mother's education, the disciplinary methods employed by the father, and the quality of inter-parental relationships were identified as noteworthy factors contributing to school bullying (Abbas et al., 2014). In a city of India, research findings revealed that 31.4% of students reported experiencing bullying in schools, with teasing and name-calling being the most prevalent forms (Kshirsagar et al., 2007). Surprisingly, only 24 percent of parents were aware that their children were being subjected to bullying (Kshirsagar et al., 2007).

Researches show that there is a connection between being bullied and performance in schools. This connection includes higher rates of missing school and lower grades (Nishina, et al., 2005). Sleep disturbance, school phobia and school absenteeism were reported common symptoms in bullied children (Kshirsagar et al., 2007). Mexican-American adolescents who disclosed experiencing chronic incidents of peer victimization also reported increased emotional distress and difficulties in their academic performance (Espinoza et al., 2013). Bullying had direct link with school academic progress so addressing peer victimization is imperative when striving to enhance educational outcomes (Juvonen, et al., 2011). Peguero (2011) investigated the influence of school-based violence and victimization on the likelihood of dropping out. The findings reveal that Black/African American and Latino American students who experience victimization in a school setting face an elevated risk of dropping out. A study aimed to see if bullying in Cape Town, South Africa, predicts students drop out of high school. Researchers surveyed 1,470 students in 1997 and checked on them again in 2001. They focused on those who had left school between 1997 and 2001 (776 students, which is 55.2%). In 1997, they found that 52% of boys and 37% of girls had been involved in bullying. Interestingly, only girls who were both bullies and victims of bullying were significantly more likely to drop out of school (Townsend et al., 2008).

Bullying is a widespread issue among school students in Pakistan as well, as a substantial portion of individuals reported experiencing bullying at least once during their lifetime, found in a recent research (Javed et al., 2023; Waheed et al., 2022). The prevalent types of bullying mentioned are verbal and emotional mistreatment; in severe instances, bullying can tragically result in suicide, as victims may experience profound feelings of helplessness and isolation (Javed et al., 2023). A study involving a sample of 200 participants from Pakistan and England aimed to compare the prevalence of bullying in both countries indicated that bullying is not perceived as a problem in Pakistan when compared to England (Hanif & Smith, 2010). A cross-sectional study carried out in ten public and private schools in Karachi, Pakistan, revealed that over 50% of teachers were unaware of the existence of bullying within the school environment (Shamsi et al., 2019).

A study conducted in six schools across Karachi, Lahore, and Quetta established a significant correlation between bullying and poor academic performance with 41.4% of students experienced bullying, included verbal abuse and physical fights (Khawaja et al., 2015). An analysis of data from 4,997 students in Pakistan, derived from the Global School Health Survey, revealed that children with inadequate hygiene practices are more likely to experience bullying, with class differences emerging as one of the contributing factors (Murshid, 2018). Unfortunately, in Pakistan, it was observed that students attending public schools were more frequently engaged in bullying, physical fights, and victimization when compared to their counterparts in private schools (Shujja et al., 2014).

Current literature demonstrate that schools often employ social workers as integral members of their crisis intervention teams (Openshaw, 2008). They play significant role in developing and implementing anti-bullying policies and programs within a school setting (Masilo, 2018).

In context of anti-bullying measures, school social workers in New York offer a range of services, including crisis intervention, conflict resolution, violence prevention, substance abuse prevention, child abuse prevention, fostering positive self-esteem, enhancing social skills, promoting character development,

providing consultation, and conducting individual, group, and family counseling (New York School Social Workers' Association, 2021). Social workers usually employ an average ratio of one staff member for every 450 students, and they handle the process of referring and providing support for students who have been impacted by violence either in the school or the community (UNICEF, 2022).

Research has also demonstrated that a higher number of school social workers in a particular area corresponds to a greater number of students successfully completing high school (Alvarez et al., 2013). A survey of school social workers in Minnesota revealed that their services led to noticeable positive outcomes, including higher school attendance and reduced disciplinary issues (Bye et al., 2009). Social workers can provide support to both the individuals who bully and those who are victims. Given that, the bullying behavior of children disrupts the right of others to learn in a safe and non-violent school environment, there is a clear need for social work intervention. This intervention takes the form of case work strategy, primarily aimed at helping children to transform their socially unacceptable conduct (Masilo, 2018). Supporting this idea, it is argued that the social worker can effectively tackle issues of inadequate discipline and bullying among students (Smith, 2016).

Considering literature on the evidence of school social work interventions in other countries and the prevalence of bullying among students in Pakistan, it is suggested that the problem of bullying in Pakistani schools can indeed be successfully managed with the support of school social workers.

### **Theoretical Framework**

School social work has its roots in the ecological perspective as a conceptual framework for practice. This framework perceives the environment of a child as an influencing factor in his/her schooling (National Association of Social Workers, 2012). Therefore, Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory was applied as theoretical framework in this research.

Bullying is also an ecological phenomenon that occurs in social, physical, institutional and community perspectives as well as the individual characteristics of the person who is bullied and victimized (Swearer & Doll, 2001). Bullying is a form of violence and it is the children's right to be free from all forms of violence. But child maltreatment especially in its violent forms appears as a part of our society's culture, which is, knowingly or unknowingly being supported by social, political and administrative practices (Jabeen, 2021). When community norms allow for the persecution of certain groups (such as racial/ethnic minorities, girls and women, etc.), adults are free to exercise these norms as well (Hawley & Williford, 2015).

When discussing the consequences of bullying, this behavior has a broader impact, affecting the entire ecosystem, including families, schools, communities, state education and consequently social welfare policies. The schools will experience rise in student absenteeism, as some students may believe that staying away will keep them safe from bullying (Masilo, 2018). If bullying victims choose to quit school, it impacts the school's overall performance, which is evaluated based on both academic achievement and student enrollment (Masilo, 2018). As community members, students experiencing bullying may seek solutions beyond the school environment, and if not addressed properly, this may lead to an increase in gang-related violence in communities (Masilo, 2018). Therefore, keeping in mind the causes and consequences of bullying, it is evident that social work interventions target not only students but also teachers, school administrators, peers, parents, and, notably, communities (Hawley & Williford, 2015).

### **Materials and Methods**

The methodology of the study was based on convergent parallel design (Creswell et al., 2011) of mixed method approach. 47 male and 53 female students of grades 6 and 10 of public schools of Tehsil City, district Lahore were selected for quantitative research by using proportional stratified random sampling technique. Quantitative data was collected from the students by administering a survey questionnaire and qualitative responses were gathered from the parents (10) and teachers (10) using an interview guide. Criteria for inclusion was poor grades and poor attendance of the students. Quantitative data was analyzed descriptively by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Binary logistic regression model was used to find out the relationship between bullying and school dropout. Qualitative data was coded into themes for thematic analysis. At the end, both qualitative and quantitative analysis were merged together for an overall interpretation.

### **Results/Findings**

Findings from the quantitative and qualitative study are mentioned in this part.

#### **Findings from the Quantitative Data:**

Findings from the quantitative data collected from the students were as follows:

**Table 1**  
*Socio-demographic Profile and Future Aspirations*

Characteristics	Percentage
Grade	
6	37
10	63
Gender	
Male	47
Female	53
Father's education	
Uneducated	90
Educated	10
Mother's education	
Uneducated	92
Educated	8
Father's working status	
Not working	3
Working	97
Mother's working status	
Not working	47
Working	53
Future aspirations regarding education	
Not sure	41
Dropout	28
Finish high school	30
Finish College	01

Table 1 demonstrates the socio-demographic profile of all students (100) who were interviewed. Out of 100 students, 63% were studying in grade 10 and 37% were in grade 6. 53% students were female and 47% were male. Majority of the fathers (90%) and mothers (92%) were uneducated. Mostly fathers (97%) and mothers (53%) of the students were working and their occupations were low paid. Mostly mothers were working as housemaids.

As mentioned earlier, inclusion criteria for interviewing students was poor grades and poor attendance. When students were asked that how long they will go in education, majority (41%) of them were not sure whether they will continue their education or will leave; and 28% confirmed that they will be dropout from the school without completing the current year. 30% of the students said that they will finish the high school and only one student was hopeful to finish college.

**Table 2**  
*Frequency of bullying and students afraid to be bullied*

Opinions	Percentages			Total (%)
	A lot	Sometimes	Not	
Students making fun of/bully other students	36	43	21	100
Student afraid to be bullied in school	37	35	28	100

Table 2 reveals the opinion of the students regarding bullying in school. Out of 100 students, 36% reported that students make fun and bully a lot, 43% reported that students bully other students as sometimes and 21% said that students do not bully other students. When asked that whether students afraid to be bullied, 37% students said that they afraid a lot, 35% reported that they feel afraid sometimes and 28% reported that they do not afraid to be bullied in school.

**Table 3**  
*Binary Logistic Regression analysis of Bullying Factors with the Chance/Risk of School Dropout*

Characteristics	School dropout	
	Odds Ratio	95% CI
Bullying		
No	Ref.	
Yes	1.31	0.46-3.70

Association of school bullying was assessed with expected school dropout (future aspirations regarding education) claimed by the students. Analysis was carried out only for those students who had poor grades and poor attendance in the school. Binary logistic regression analysis was fitted with school dropout (non-dropout, dropout), due to the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable. Binary Logistic Regression analysis shows the log odds of dropout from school as much higher (1.31) for those children who were bullied than those who had not faced any bully. It means that students who face bullying in school has 1.31 times more chances to dropout from school as compared to those students who do not face bullying.

### **Findings from the Qualitative Data**

Following themes were emerged from the qualitative interviews:

#### **Theme 1: Prevalence of Bullying.**

During quantitative interviews, teachers and parents reported that bullying is a big issue in the public schools. They said that “students taunt and tease other students and use abusive language. They call others with bad names, highlighting his/her physical appearance, for example, if someone is overweight or have dark skin color” (T5, interview 23 June 2021; T7, interview 29 June 2021 & T10, interview 12 July 2021). A mother (P1, interview 09 June 2021) reported that, “the class fellows of my daughter use to taunt her regarding my second marriage and my daughter gets upset.” One teacher (T8, interview 3 July 2021) claimed, “it seems that bullying is in the nature of human being and it is too much in the schools; the reason perhaps is the competition among students.” Many teachers and parents reported that “students bully and fight outside the school when there is no control of school administration” (T5, interview 23 June 2021; T2, interview 11 June 2021; T7, interview 29 June 2021 & T10, interview 12 July 2021).

A teacher (T5, interview 23 June 2021) of female students reported that “girls are more sensitive if they are bullied and instead of facing it they get afraid; even do not report it to the teachers, we find only when we see someone in tears.” Another teacher (T1, interview 07 June 2021) said that “sometimes students also do not trust on teachers to share their problems.”

#### **Theme 2: Corporal Punishment.**

A male teacher (T2, interview 11 June 2021) reported that “they use the strategy of corporal punishment to control the problem of bullying because boys do it whenever they get a chance.” Another teacher (T9, interview 07 July 2021) said, “we practice corporal punishment sometimes on students who get poor grades, stay absent and involve in bullying and fights; if we do not use it, we cannot handle the boys because they are quite grown up.”

#### **Theme 3: Need for School Social Work.**

Profession of school social work was introduced by the researcher to all the respondents of qualitative interviews and the roles which school social workers performs in other countries were also explained to them. Teachers (T1, interview 07 June 2021; T7, interview 29 June 2021 & T10, interview 12 July 2021) reported that, “we are overburdened and spend half of our time in managing the issues of the students.” Another teacher said that, “we do not get time with large class size to concentrate more on such students” (T3, interview 14 June 2021). “Sometimes students also do not trust on teachers to share their problems, so school social workers should be employed to help us” (T1, interview 07 June 2021). Parents responded that “there should be *someone* who can help us in solving our problems because it is difficult for us to cope with all challenges at the same time (P1, interview 09 June 2021; P2 interview 16 June 2021; P8, interview 01 July 2021; P4, interview 17 June 2021 & P7, interview 30 June).

### **Triangulation**

Through triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data sets, more holistic view of school bullying was achieved including its prevalence, nature and possible underlying causes. Students, during quantitative interviews, reported that they faced bullying and felt afraid from being bullied. These quantitative results converge with the qualitative findings where the teachers pointed out that bullying is too much in the schools.

Triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data recognize that students feel fear from being bullied and its impacts are multifaceted. It concludes that girls are more sensitive to bullying and hesitate to report it. As they feel upset when some taunt them related to their parents’ personal matter (e.g., second marriage).

### **Discussion**

This present study analyzes that, the students of public schools who do not perform well in studies and stay frequent absent face bullying which was never addressed, diagnosed and treated by anyone and this is one of the reason that’s why they have low future aspirations regarding their studies. As Thomson (2005) mentioned that bullying does not only disrupt children’s’ school experience but also impede their ability to attain the qualifications necessary for their desired careers.

Criteria of inclusion in this research was the poor attendance and poor grades of the students. Binary logistic regression analysis revealed that the students who face bullying have more chances of dropout from

the school as the log odds of dropout from school were much higher (1.31) for those children who were bullied than those who had not faced any bully. This implies that students who face bullying in the schools, they perform poor in their academics, demonstrate less attendance and at the risk of dropout. Previous literature provides evidence that bullying in school relates to poor educational achievement (Kim et al., 2020; Mbah, 2020; Samara et al., 2021), and a cause of school absenteeism and dropout (Masilo, 2018; Peguero, 2011; Townsend et al., 2008).

In this research, the students were from families characterized by low socioeconomic status, and majority of the parents had limited educational background. Likewise, earlier studies indicate that family income (Ighaede-Edwards et al., 2023) and mother's education (Abbas et al., 2014) are major contributing factors in bullying. During qualitative interviews it was found that students also bully and fight outside the school when there is no control of school administration, Masilo (2018) mentioned that, bullying tends to be most prominently noticed when it manifests as physical aggression and students are integral members of communities, and consequently, those who have experienced bullying may choose to seek solutions for their issues beyond the school's boundaries.

Findings of the current study asserts that mostly students do not report bullying to anyone, even though they feel afraid of it. The situation is worsened when a victim of bullying is unable to report the incident to the teachers at schools or to their parents at home (Masilo, 2018) due to fear and avoidance (Vidourek et al., 2016). Teachers reported that they practice corporal punishment on the students who involve in bullying and fights. Using corporal punishment in response to bullying can potentially exacerbate the problem, as it may not address the root causes of the behavior and can lead to further aggression and harm. Apart from corporal punishment, teachers were found helpless due to limited time and lack of particular skills to handle bullying behavior. Parents expressed need for *someone* to help them.

In the pursuit of preventing bullying, school social workers serve as essential contributors (Smith, 2016). Social work intervention employs casework approach to support these children, with primarily focus on helping them to transform their behavior, which is deemed socially inappropriate (Masilo, 2018). School Social Work asserts that every student should have access to resources, skills, and assistance of caring adults and peers who are dedicated to preventing bullying (School Social Work Association of America, 2023). Past studies have demonstrated that school social work interventions have a beneficial effect, leading to higher school attendance, a reduction in disciplinary issues (Bye et al., 2009) and an increase in the number of students completing high school (Alvarez et al., 2013).

Based on person-in-environment perspective, school social workers believe that school based interventions must be aimed not only at students, but also at teachers, school administrators, peers, parents, and, perhaps most uniquely, communities (Hawley & Williford, 2015). Building on the preceding discussion, it is asserted that the introduction of school social work intervention in Pakistan is essential to address the bullying problem in government schools.

### **Conclusion**

The present study concludes that students in public schools in Pakistan experience bullying, which induces fear and has detrimental effects on their academic performance, attendance, and the risk of dropping out. This issue has been largely unaddressed and untreated. Teachers often lack the time and resources to tackle this problem, and parents are preoccupied with making both ends meet, leaving these children without the necessary support for a meaningful educational experience.

In summary, the preceding discussion highlights that school social workers possess the expertise to address issues related to bullying, academic underperformance, absenteeism, and dropout rates (alvarez et al., 2013; bye et al., 2009; masilo, 2018; openshaw, 2008; smith, 2016). Therefore, based on the research findings and existing literature, it is evident that the implementation of a school social work program can effectively resolve the problem of school bullying.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the study findings, following recommendations are made:

1. Education policy needs to acknowledge challenges faced by many children and introduce school social work to help address these challenges.
2. Induction of the school social workers could be done in collaboration with the Social Welfare Department (SWD), on the same model as Social Welfare Department provides Medical Social Services in the Health Department.
3. Subject of school social work could be offered as a compulsory course in the curriculum of BS Social Work at university level.
4. School social workers could help/support teachers/school administration in making them informed regarding the students' issue such as bullying.

5. Induction of School Social Workers would also increase social welfare contribution in achieving national and international Social Development Goals e.g. SDGs related to children's wellbeing and education.

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