Understanding the Nature and Characteristics of Workplace Bullying: Perceptions of Victimized Teachers in Lahore's Public Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the nature and characteristics of workplace bullying among public school teachers in Lahore, Pakistan. Qualitative phenomenological approach was used and data were collected through in-depth interviews with public school teachers who previously reported facing bullying by colleagues. Thematic analysis demonstrated that bullying is a recurrent and systematic form of abuse embedded in weak organizational structures. Main characteristics include cyclical nature of bullying, the prevalence of a culture where victims also become perpetrators, the absence of hierarchical boundaries, and the prevalence of group dynamics. Victims reported that bullying often begins with informality. Motivations were explained in association with struggles for power and influence, habitual tendencies, jealousy, personal dislike, insecurity towards capable peers, and sadistic satisfaction. These findings align with symbolic interactionism and organizational theories, showing how both cultural and institutional structures enable bullying. The study contributes uniquely by centering teachers' perceptions, offering critical insights into how school teachers who have personally experienced bullying and mistreatment by colleagues explain and interpret its nature and characteristics within the context of public schools in Pakistan.

Keywords: *Workplace Bullying, Nature Of Bullying, Characteristics Of Bullying, Victimized Teachers, Teachers' Wellbeing, Bullying At School.*

Introduction

Workplace bullying is a negative behavior that takes place at a workplace. It is characterized by frequent negative action of one or more perpetrators against an individual or a group or individuals (Volk, Dane, & Marini, 2014). In most of the cases, work place bullying is directed towards those who have less power or prestige within the workplace but mistreatment can also come from the same rank colleagues. Workplace bullying can have multiple forms as the perpetrator can target the victim psychologically, verbally and in worst cases physically. (Yang & Salmivalli, 2013). Bullying at an office can have other forms as well. It might include excessive and unnecessary questioning by a senior about a subordinate's work, hiding of crucial information, unnecessarily strict deadlines or intentional overburdening of the victim. Perpetrators at the workplace can also use tactics like "Social exclusion", "gossips", "insult in the public" and illogical criticism on the victim's personality, appearance, decisions and choices. In worst cases, things

might get physical as path blocking, shoving or pushing and use of humiliating gestures are also among the perpetrators' tactics against the victims (Einarsen et al., 2009: Kennedy, 2020).

Bullying should not be confused with regular workplace conflict which is generally based on workers' difference of opinion, working style or competition. On the other side, bullying is directed towards a person or a group of persons. It is systematic mistreatment of the victim with a negative intention to harm or disappoint the person at the receiving end (Hoel et al., 1999). Most of the earlier studies that are related to bullying are focused on understanding the problem among students and young adults but now, experiences of adult population with workplace bullying and mistreatment are frequently being explored by the researchers (Mehmood, Rasool, Ahmed, Haddad, & Al-Ramahi, 2024; Srivastava, Chhabra, Madan, & Puri, 2023; Jahanzeb, Fatima, & De Clercq, 2021; Munro & Phillips, 2023; Namie, 2021).

Mistreatment at the workplace has negative impact on a person's health as it can lead to several problems including depression, anxiety, sleeplessness (Boudrias, Trépanier, & Salin, 2021; Goh, Hosier, & Zhang, 2022; Singh & Srivastava, 2023; Portelada, Candeias, & João, 2024; Osler, 2021). These problems then negatively affect the victims' professional life with feelings like job burnout along with the lack of focus on the work (Kamran, Bugvi, & Asghar, 2024). In some cases, things might get worst as some people might leave the organization. No organization can afford the development of such a negative workplace culture which can hinder the progress of an organization.

While the majority of existing research work is focused on bullying in schools, colleges and university settings, there is an increasing trend among researchers to explore experiences of adults with workplace mistreatment in different professional fields including healthcare sector, corporate sector and education sector (Boudrias, Trépanier, & Salin, 2021; Goh, Hosier, & Zhang, 2022; Singh & Srivastava, 2023; Portelada, Candeias, & João, 2024; Osler, 2021). School teachers are not an exception as they are also prone to workplace mistreatment and bullying by the colleagues (Kamran et al., 2024; (Scheeler, Markelz, Taylor, Deshpande, & Wolfe, 2022).

This research work builds upon a previous qualitative investigation by (Kamran et al., 2024) which was led by the primary author. The study examined the school teachers' experiences of facing workplace bullying in public schools of Lahore. Although, assessment of characteristics of bullying was not one among the primary objectives of that earlier research but due to the qualitative nature of that research, many respondents were sharing additional information and their views about bullying at workplace. Those views were reflecting a lot about "Bullying" as a phenomenon. At that time, the researchers confined themselves to the investigation of research questions of that research due to limited time but the additional views from the teachers about nature of bullying paved the way for a new study on bullying among teachers in school settings. As a result, the researchers decided to conduct another research with the same respondents at a different time in order to get deeper insights into the nature of bullying from the lens of those who reported facing it during the previous studies.

Literature Review

Workplace bullying can be defined as any set of negative actions that are repeated in nature. Those actions reflect power imbalance between the perpetrators of bullying and the victims. Workplace bullying is common phenomenon among various sectors including education sector. Bullying can include negative behaviors that can include verbal abuse, physical push or tactics like exclusion. Workplace mistreatment can have negative effects on teachers' wellbeing and can

have negative biopsychosocial consequences (De Vos and Kirsten, 2015). Quantitative assessments have concluded that bullying at the workplace significantly affect mental health outcomes in negative way and increase the risk of mental health disorder (Bunce, Hashemi, Clark, Stansfeld, Myers, & McManus, 2024).

Mistreatment from same level colleagues is not the only type of negative behavior that teachers face. Principals can also demonstrate negative behavior through negative practices that significantly affect the teacher's wellbeing in negative ways (Ukwizagira, 2025). It is a serious issue that is not frequently reported by the victim, often due to lack of trust on schools' administration and management (Scheeler, Markelz, Taylor, Deshpande, & Wolfe, 2022). In other instances, researchers have reported those scenarios where organizational policies and interventions come into play to improve the situation for teachers at the workplace. Landsbergis and colleagues (2017, 2018) narrated that organizational policies and interventions play an important role in reducing teachers' occupational stress. These factors were also associated with decrease risks of workplace violence among teachers.

The Irish researchers offer important insight into the complexities of workplace mistreatment faced by teachers with a different perspective. Unlike Landsbergis and colleagues (2017, 2018), Mannix McNamara, Fitzpatrick, MacCurtain, and O'Brien (2018) reported that workplace's policies do not necessarily address the real issue in true sense. They conducted a qualitative research with the school teachers to explore their experiences of seeking redress through formal procedures within their schools. The results indicated that despite engagement of all the participants with the official complaints procedures, no one reported satisfaction with the results. Instead, frustration, emotional distress, and a sense that institutional mechanisms failed to provide meaningful protection were frequently reported. The research work highlighted how teachers who attempted to improve the circumstances through formal channels are subjected to systemic abuses of institutional power reinforced by collusive workplace culture, which further worsens the situation.

Study by Mannix McNamara et al. (2018) highlights the limitations of policy-based approaches to addressing workplace bullying in educational settings and demonstrates the importance of critically investigating how institutional responses may inadvertently perpetuate rather than address teachers' experiences of bullying. Studies across different countries also suggest the same notion as targeted mistreatment by teachers is rooted in organizational hierarchies and collective relationships. Schiller et al. (2022) revealed that bullying against teachers is not merely an interpersonal conflict but often reflects hidden institutional cultures of power imbalance. Similarly, Bunce et al. (2024) highlighted significant associations between workplace bullying and the prevalence of mental health issues, identifying biopsychosocial repercussion for victims. As earlier mentioned, De Vos and Kirsten (2015) documented how persistent bullying erodes teachers' confidence and fosters professional isolation in the South African context.

Despite these efforts, the literature is fragmented. Literature is relying on a variety of terms to describe teachers' experiences of workplace mistreatment, including harassment, mobbing, and horizontal violence, which complicates understanding and limits generalizability. Furthermore, most recent studies are based on quantitative methods that measure prevalence but fail to capture the thematic meanings associated with teachers' bullying. Scholars such as Batchelor (2019) argue that qualitative approaches are necessary to uncover the ways in which teachers interpret, label, and cope with such experiences.

Overall, the literature makes it clear that bullying at the workplace among teachers is a common phenomenon, but it is not fully recognized with serious personal and institutional consequences. There is a lack of local studies, particularly in South Asian contexts, points to the need for research that will explore teachers' narratives and document their experiences within school setting.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses theoretical lenses from a combination of symbolic interactionism and organizational theories of workplace bullying. Symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) provides the framework through which teachers' lived experiences of bullying can be explored. It emphasizes that social reality is constructed through our interactions with each other and construction of shared meanings. In this study, it allows for a comprehension of how teachers themselves define bullying, and how they interpret its nature and characteristics. Teachers are thus understood as meaning-makers whose subjective narratives are central in development of definitions of bullying.

To complement the above mentioned perspectives, the current study also considers Einarsen's Work Environment Hypothesis (Einarsen et al., 1994, 2011) and Salin's Process Model of Workplace Bullying (Salin, 2003). These frameworks understand bullying as a product of hostile organizational environments, power imbalances and functional structures. They highlight key characteristics of bullying including repetitive nature, intent to harm, power coordination, and organizational tolerance. Combining these models provides a framework for understanding how organizational factors shape bullying in schools.

Collectively, these perspectives create a comprehensive framework where symbolic interactionism captures how teachers understand and define bullying in their own words, while organizational frameworks of bullying understand these concepts within a broader institutional and cultural context. Collectively, these lenses allow the study to explore not only how teachers experience and define bullying, but also how its characteristics align with or differ from established theoretical understandings in the workplace bullying literature.

Methodology

This study builds on a previous qualitative investigation by Kamran et al. (2024), which explored teachers' experiences of workplace bullying in public schools in Lahore. While the earlier research was mainly focused on teachers' accounts of bullying, many teachers shared additional information about nature of bullying and its core characteristics. At the time, the scope of the study limited the analysis of these views, but additional narratives encouraged this follow-up study that aimed to explore the nature and characteristics of workplace bullying from the perspective of teachers.

Research Design

A qualitative phenomenological design was adopted to record teachers' lived experiences and subjective understanding of bullying. This design was chosen because it allowed participants' understanding and meanings to be central. It gave them the opportunity to describe how they defined and experienced bullying in their workplace contexts.

Participants and Sample

Participants were selected from a group of teachers who had previously participated in the study and who reported experiencing bullying. The researchers contacted these teachers directly through the same communication channels used in the first study (including phone numbers and

personal contacts collected with consent). Those who showed willingness to participate again were engaged again for this study. A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure that participants had direct experience of workplace bullying.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interviews provided a platform for participants to expand on their previous narratives and express their interpretations of the bullying phenomenon, including its characteristics and nature. Each interview lasted approximately 35-50 minutes and was conducted in Urdu language. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim with prior permission.

Data Analysis

This research used thematic analysis following Brown and Clarke's (2006) six-step model. The method was selected because it allowed the researchers to identify recurring patterns in participants' narratives. Themes were developed from the data, focusing on how teachers understand and describe the nature of bullying and highlighting its key features.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained before collection of data. Participants were informed about the objectives of the study and provided written consent forms. Confidentiality and anonymity were kept in view during the whole process of research as no names were used in data analysis section of this paper.

Data Analysis

Theme 1: Characteristics of Bullying

First theme that emerged during the analysis of data was termed "Characteristics of bullying". The participants defined bullying in detail from their own point of views. Data that was recorded during that phase revealed a theme "Characteristics of bullying" later. Characteristics of bullying that were identified are defined in the narration to come.

Subtheme 1. Repetitive. Bully perpetration was reported to be a repetitive phenomenon. Participant 1 said, "It is cyclic in nature. It happens again and again". Participant 4 informed, "If you have allowed that for once, it will happen repeatedly". Participant 9 asserted, "They never stop once they start". Participant 11 informed, "You will have to face it till end of your career. People who are doing it are going to stay and no one is going to stop them in the long run because it is considered normal". While participant 17 also reported about the repetitive nature of bullying behavior by saying, "Their behavior becomes irritating because their mistreatment is regular. It is part of their routine".

Subtheme 2. Thrives in Weak Organizational Structures. According to the participants of this research, people cannot be mistreated at organizations with stronger formal system systems. Data demonstrated that the organizations where people are not responsible for their actions are more likely to promote an environment where bullies can play their mind games. Participant 3 said, "It happens at the organizations with the weak systems and low control. Even the principal is afraid to warn the person who has a strong background". Participant 6 reported the same in these words, "I think such things cannot happen at a highly professional workplace". Participant 8 said, "No one can dare to mistreat a colleague on the basis of her gender at an organization with strict rules. I am facing it because I am part of a school that has a weak management". Participant 12 blamed the school management for the prevalence of bullying at the workplace by saying, "School management is to be blamed. They ignore everything and consider the acts of

bullies as jokes that should be ignored. It is their weakness because everything is happening under their nose".

Subtheme 3. Victim can turn into Bully. The participants of this research indicated that the bullying environment diffuses every member within that environment. Several participants identified that they know people at their schools who were previously bullied also became bullies after working in that environment for some time. Participant 4 said, "Everyone is ultimately diffused into the school culture. Instead of changing that culture, people are changed by the culture". Participant reported the same phenomenon by saying, "Even those who are mistreated start showing signs of being bullies themselves. I have seen people coming here from decent background changing due to influence of those who are already there". Participant 12 also informed that those who are bullied also become bullies in these words, "It effects everyone and in order to survive the time at the school during free hours, even those who are bullied start showing characteristics of those who bully them".

Subtheme 4. No Hierarchical Limits. Persons in any role can be bullies. Many participants including participant number 2, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 17 and 19 reported that colleagues from any level of formal hierarchy can mistreat them. Participant 5 said, "It does not matter what the rank is, colleague at any position can be a bully". Participant 6 informed, "I am bullied mostly by the seniors. People on similar positions have similar powers and authorities so they are less likely to show the intentions to hurt you verbally because they know that you can respond back". Participant 11 reported the unpleasant behavior of the seniors by saying, "Mistreatment is directed towards the juniors". Participant 17 said, "When the overall environment of the school is unprofessional, anyone from any position can crack stupid jokes. Rank does not matter, environment does".

Subtheme 5. Groups of Bullies. Probe question was asked about the network of the bullies within the school. Responses from the participant demonstrated that the bullies at the workplace form their groups with other like-minded people in order to play their mind games. Several research participants informed that bullies move around with other bullies. Participant 6 said, "They attack together". Participant 7 informed, "It's a group, not a single person. An individual cannot be involved in the workplace politics all alone". Participant 9 said, "A bully is known by the company he keeps (with a laughter)". Participant 12 put a question that had an answer in it to the researchers' probe question, "Some of their friends also try to become informal and after a few meetings, they also start teasing. Who gives them rights to exploit my personal space?".

Subtheme 6. Bullying as a tool against the victim's self-esteem. On asking about the reasons of the mistreatment by the bullies, the respondents informed that insulting jokes, name calling and teasing among other forms of mistreatment are used as a tool to lower the victim's self-esteem as such mistreatment can make the person at the receiving end feel guilty. Bullying, as described by participants in this research, is often characterized by deliberate actions aimed at inflicting harm upon the victim. "They do it deliberately. In order to insult me," one participant emphasized, reflecting a clear understanding of the calculated nature of mistreatment. Another participant echoed this sentiment, stating, "They treat others like that in order to degrade them. They know that it can damage a person's self-respect." These statements reveal a shocking reality: the bullies like colleagues engage in mistreatment with calculated intentions. Whether it's to insult, degrade, or induce feelings of guilt, the underlying motivation remains same. Statement from participant 4 "The person who is mistreating someone else sometimes does that

with conscious effort with the purpose to make the other person feel guilty," further exemplifying the conscious and intentional nature of bullying tactics. Participants note a conscious effort by bullies to undermine the self-respect and dignity of their targets, recognizing the potential damage inflicted upon their mental well-being. This insight sheds light on the nature of bullying, highlighting how people exercise their power to control others.

Subtheme 7. Socialization. Many respondents regarded bullying behavior as a typical result of improper socialization. Participant 3 said, "They are not trained. They do not know how to behave". Participant 1 reported these comments, "The one who irritates me the most comes from a background from where I believe no mature person can emerge". Participant 6 reported her observation by saying, "It is normal for them and people around them. They do it in their personal life as well! You know what I mean. They give each other bad nick names; they tease each other and they make stupid jokes in their personal spheres. It is normal for them. They have been brought up in such an environment". Participant 8 used these words for one of his bully colleagues, "His background is to be blamed". Participant 7 defined the disrespectful behavior of her colleague by saying, "She mistreats me because she comes from a neighborhood where the majority of people are illiterate. Our socialization matters and that is where I think she lacks. Sometimes, I feel pity for her instead of getting angry at her due to the fact the she is miserable because of her miserable brought up". Participant 14 tried to guess about the potential background of bullies by saying, "I think all of them are brought up in kind of backgrounds where such behavior is considered absolutely normal".

Subtheme 8. Starts with informality. It was reported by various participants including 2, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13 and 14 that the victims of bullying unknowingly welcome the harassers by letting informality come into play. Participant 2 said, "It happens due to the weakness of the person at the receiving end. The person interacts with the colleagues slightly informally but it turns out that some of those colleagues start becoming too informal with their inappropriate jokes". Participant 7 reported "Everyone should be kept on one's limits right from the beginning. I would say I am facing that (mistreatment) because I allowed them to exploit me in the first place. I should not have casually ignored and laughed at the first ever stupid joke that was cracked on me". Participant 8 said, "Relations at the workplace should be highly formal. No one should just jump into personal links right at the beginning of joining the office. Appropriate time should be given to assess each person at your workplace before allowing any person to be in your close circles". Participant 9 and 11 used statements including, "It all starts with informal links between the colleagues" and "We started behaving like friends too early" respectively.

Theme 2: Reasons for bullying

While interviewing the research participants, the researchers of this study asked probe questions to the respondents. When the respondents were asked to provide information about reasons for bullying. They come up with multiple explanations which are narrated hereunder.

Subtheme 1. Bullying for Power & Influence. Many participants informed the researcher about the intentions of the perpetrator to control and influence the behavior of others through bullying. A participant reported, "It is a valid way of getting control of people. Firstly, you start bullying them and tease them on something. Then you make it their weak point and start using it to control them". Participant 3 said, "Bullies are generally influential people". Participant 6 used the statement, "He wants to have an influence over everyone and he uses his tongue (verbal attacks of bullying) to control others. It works for them". While participant 17 said, "Everyone

wants to influence others. Some people do it by trying to verbally dominate the others". Statements from participant number 4 and 18 also identified that reason. These responses draw our attention towards the will to dominate among some people which can motivate them to disturb others around them.

Subtheme 2. Bullies are Habitual. Respondents informed the researcher that bullying perpetrators are habitual. They keep on repeating their harmful actions. Participant 5 said about one of the bullies, "He is habitual. He makes stupid jokes with everyone". Participant number 10 said about the bullying perpetrators, "They do that because it is part of their personalities". Participant number 12 said, "I think they are like that since forever" while participant 14 said about the perpetrators, "They are regular in their activities".

Subtheme 3. Disagreement and difference of opinions. Participant number1,2,4,7,13 and 19 informed that bullying perpetrators can become teasing and start bullying on disagreements and differences in the opinions. Participant 1 said, "Some people can't tolerate difference of opinion. They will start attacking someone with a different opinion". Participant use that statement, "You will have to agree with them on everything if you want to be treated with respect". Statements from other mention participants also illustrated that bullies might start victimization of persons at the receiving end if they "victims" disagree on any issue.

Subtheme 4. Personal Hatred, dislike or jealousy. Participant 3 said about her colleague, "She does not like me so she bullies. On that level, it is pathetic". Participant 6 said, "Victim is generally the one they dislike, sometimes due to his thoughts and ideas, sometimes due to their outlook. Jealousy can play a role as well". Participant 11 said, "When you do not like someone you work with, you cannot directly proclaim that. Resultantly, you start demonstrating that hatred through your behavior".

Subtheme 5. Insecurities among Bullies from potentially talented colleague. Another reason which was identified during the interview was insecurity of the bullies. Participant 4 said, "They are jealous. They cannot be as good as I am at my work. It irritates them and they start teasing me. That is the only thing they can do about it". Participant 6 responded, "Younger talents are targeted more often as mistreatment is after all a way to disturb any talented person". participant 16 stated, "Experienced people are insecure from the newcomers, especially from those who have talents and abilities. Youngsters are often bullied and irritated. Reason at the backend is their talent which triggers the feelings of insecurities among some seniors with poor performance in the past". While Participant 17 highlighted, "Competent people speak about everything as they want the system to change but those who are already comfortable with the present system are in no way going to like anyone who gives suggestions to change that system. In order to keep the talented and competent person quiet, the insecure one start their bullying stuff". Participant 19 stated, "This is the way they defend themselves because they are not familiar with any sober ways. Instead of improving themselves, they start targeting those who have any kind of advantage over them".

Subtheme 5. Sadistic Satisfaction. Participant 2 stated, "The one who irritates me is a sadist. He feels happy after hurting people through his words". Participant 3 said, "They feel happy after degrading others". Participant 7, "He and his friends are okay when I am not okay". Participant 9 gave insightful statement while defining the groups of bullies, "They feed themselves with their stupid jokes. They like it. This is all they have to offer in the school when they are free. One among them actually acknowledges that name calling and joking are actually ways for him to

release his stress" Participant 14 stated about the bullies, "That group is made up of those who are very comfortable while insulting others".

Table 1: *Themes and Sub-Themes Identified from Data Analysis*

Major Theme	Identified Themes	Sub-Themes
Nature and Characteristics of Bullying	Characteristics of Bullying	Repetitive Thrives in Weak Organizational Structures Victim Can Turn into Bully No Hierarchical Limits Groups of Bullies Bullying as a Tool Against Self-Esteem Socialization It Starts with Informality
	Reasons for Bullying	Bullying for Power & Influence Bullies are Habitual Disagreement and Difference of Opinions Personal Hatred, Dislike, or Jealousy Insecurities Among Bullies Sadistic Satisfaction

Discussion

The results of this investigation reveal that workplace bullying among teachers in Lahore's public schools is multidimensional, includes repetitive mistreatment, weak organizational control and structures, group dynamics, and intentional efforts to target victims' self-esteem. Teachers also informed about reasons for bullying which included a desire for power and influence, habitual tendencies of perpetrators, jealousy, personal dislike, and insecurities among colleagues. These results are consistent with existing scholarship that defines bullying as a systematic misuse of power which is different from regular interpersonal conflict (Hoel, Rayner, & Cooper, 1999; Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011).

One of the most dominant themes which emerged from the data was the "repetitive nature" of bullying. Participants highlighted multiple times that once bullying becomes part of in workplace culture once it starts. This confirms the findings of De Vos and Kirsten's (2015) who reported that workplace bullying among teachers was regular and normalized, it damages teachers' wellbeing. Similarly, Bunce et al. (2024) concluded strong correlation between repeated exposure to bullying and mental health challenges including anxiety and depression.

Second important finding was about survival of bullying in weak organizational structures. Teachers reported that a lack of accountability and ineffective management practices create an enabling platform for bullies. These insights are aligned with Salin's (2003) process model of workplace bullying, which explains how lack of intervention and organizational tolerance reinforce bullying behaviors. On the contrary, Landsbergis et al. (2017, 2018) highlighted that strong organizational interventions can reduce bullying risk and stress among the victims. It suggests that Lahore's public schools might get benefits from stronger intervention programs.

The data highlighted the phenomenon where victims become bullies. It indicates a diffusion of toxic workplace culture within schools. This finding enhances Einarsen's (1994) work environment hypothesis, which asserts that hostile organizational environments not only clear the way for bullying but also push employees into such negative behaviors. The nature of bullying

highlighted in this study reflect Namie's (2021) U.S. survey findings that bullying behaviors often reproduce themselves across time and employees.

It was found that bullying crosses hierarchical levels. It showed that colleagues from any level can by perpetrators. Scheeler et al. (2022) had similar findings in the context of special education where bullying was prevalent across levels. Sometimes, even higher position within the workplace cannot stop a person from being a target. This multidirectional nature also aligns with a study on "upward bullying," where subordinates mistreated their seniors (Branch, Ramsay, & Barker, 2013), emphasizing the nature of power relationships in educational spaces.

The identification of a subtheme personal factors such as jealousy, insecurities, and sadistic satisfaction explains the motivations of the bullies. Teachers' experiences suggest that talented or outspoken individuals are often targeted by insecure colleagues. This finding is aligned with work of Jahanzeb, Fatima, and De Clercq (2021), who argued that workplace bullying is a mechanism to silence competent workers through intimidation and anger. Finally, the subtheme which indicated that bullying begins with the informality provided new insights by reporting that excessive informality can open the door to disrespect and mistreatment. Here, it can be argued that formal behavior might be used as a defense mechanism against the bullies.

Overall, the findings reveal a close interplay between organizational structures, organizational cultures, and interpersonal relations in shaping workplace mistreatment. They extend prior literature by contextualizing the problem in Pakistan's public-school system, where weak management structures and informal cultures seem to increase the risks of bullying.

Conclusion

This study contributes to what we know about workplace bullying by reporting how teachers in Lahore's public schools define its nature and characteristics. The results demonstrate that bullying is repetitive, thrives in weak systems, go beyond hierarchies, and can operates through groups and informal interactions. The study also emphasizes that bullying is not merely an individual behavioral issue but is embedded within organizational cultures and institutional structures.

By explaining teachers' lived experiences in light of established theories such as symbolic interactionism, the work environment hypothesis, and Salin's process model, this study demonstrates the importance of integrating both subjective interpretations and organizational analyses. Teachers' views confirm that bullying has unpleasant professional and psychological consequences, which confirms the evidences from previous studies (De Vos & Kirsten, 2015; Bunce et al., 2024; Singh & Srivastava, 2023). However, unlike some contexts where policy interventions show promise (Landsbergis et al., 2017, 2018), the findings suggest that policies alone may not resolve the problem unless cultures within workplaces shift towards professionalism and accountability (Mannix McNamara et al., 2018).

The study is unique due to two contributions. First, it explains the phenomenon in Pakistani context, where research on workplace bullying in the education sector is limited. In that way, this study fills a gap in literature. Second, it shows that teachers' own interpretations of bullying give valuable insights into how bullying happens and how strategies may be designed.

Future studies should consider these findings by exploring cross-sectoral comparisons, examining gendered dimensions of bullying in schools, and evaluating organizational interventions specific to South Asian contexts. For policy makers and school managers, the

findings highlight the urgent need for the development anti-bullying programs that go beyond formal procedures and address cultural and structural enablers of workplace mistreatment.

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