Using Safe-to-Learn Strategies for Protecting Children with Disabilities in Schools: A Case Study of Pakistan

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Abstract

Children with disabilities are often more prone to abuse in Pakistan. This article is based on a qualitative study using formal interviews as a data collection tool. The participants were asked about their perspective on the current practices of protecting children in schools, especially those with disabilities, and how to improve the system for safeguarding the Children to Learn Initiative. The research found that a right-based, systematic approach needs to be taken to improve school systems for the protection of children with disabilities against abuse and neglect, where attention is paid to prevention, response strengthening, and overall management and referral systems.

Key words: Child Abuse, Protection, Disability, School, Pakistan

Introduction

While there is no central database for recording cases of child abuse and neglect, civil society reports and academic research highlight the issue in Pakistan. As the prevalence of child abuse and neglect is much higher in low-income and developing countries, it can be estimated that the numbers are much higher in Pakistan.[1] In 2022, Sahil reported at least 12 children are abused every day, looking at cases reported in newspapers.[2] In another study, it is reported that at least 94% of boys and 85% of girls report experiencing bullying in schools.[3] Teachers report that child physical and

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emotional abuse is pretty common in schools, and child sexual abuse is not unheard of.[4]

Globally, it is estimated that more than one billion children between the ages of 2 and 17 have experienced emotional, physical, or sexual violence/abuse or neglect.[5] This includes around estimated 246 million children who have experienced violence in and around schools.[6]

Violence against children can include physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse along with neglect. When perpetrated by a peer, peer violence or bullying is also common in school settings. Bullying can also be physical, emotional, and sexual. Research shows that emotional victimization, followed by physical victimization and sexual victimization, is common in schools.[7]

Violence or abuse happening at school and other places can have long-term physical, social, and psychological impacts on the child. Physical impacts may include obesity, modest physical inactivity, and permanent physical disability. Psychological and social effects may consist of developing a reactive attachment disorder, poor self-rated health outcomes, and problems in interpersonal relationships.[8]

While child abuse and neglect can happen to any child, some factors interplay and make it more likely for a child to experience childhood abuse & neglect or violence. According to the ecological model first proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1973) and later adopted by Belsky (1980), these factors suggest that a child interacts via various systems. The interaction between individual, (i) individual, relationship, community, and societal factors determine the risk for a child to be victimized. Individual factors include a child's age, gender disability. From a Pakistani perspective, relationship factors include the presence of domestic violence, neglect by parents, living arrangements, and the relationship between extended family members. Community factors include violence at homes or in neighborhoods and the presence of practices such as child Labour. Societal factors include broader socio-cultural and political factors and policies.[9]

Looking at the individual factors, children with disabilities are much more likely to experience multiple forms of abuse than their typically developing children. The prevalence of kinds of abuse and neglect varies according to the types of disabilities. For example, children with hearing impairments or who are deaf are four times more likely to be physically abused and twice more likely to be emotionally abused than their typically developing peers. Girls with disabilities are more at risk of neglect and

sexual abuse, whereas boys with disabilities are more likely to be physically and emotionally abused.[10]

A detailed desk review shows that while Pakistan is obligatory to various international commitments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Sustainable Development Goals, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, along with national frameworks and legislations related to protecting children with disabilities in Pakistan, there is a need to develop a holistic, systematic, multidisciplinary and multi-sectoral approach to safeguarding children in schools.[11]

In most developed countries, the state and the schools have taken adequate steps to protect children, especially those who are more at risk. Along with international commitments, global initiatives and movements are shaping and helping all countries, even those from middle and low-income brackets, to work on child protection system development and strengthening. Safe to Learn is a global initiative to combat violence in and outside school settings. This initiative pushes each country's government and education authorities to adopt a five-point agenda focusing on strategies to keep children safe in and outside school. These points are based on international commitments, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), especially SDG Target 4.5, Target 4.7, Target 4. and Target 16.2 and global End Violence Against Children initiative. Its partners include United Nations agencies, including UNICEF, UNESCO, UNGEI and the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children along with WHO, the World Bank, Education Cannot Wait (ECW), the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), the Global Business Coalition for Education and other global forums, education and protection civil society organizations and ministries.[12]

The Safe to Learn call for action includes the following five-point agenda: 1) Implementation of policy and legislation, 2) strengthening of school-level prevention and response, 3) Shift of social norms and behavior choices, 3) investing resources effectively, and 5) generation of usage of evidence.[13]

While Safe to Learn Diagnostic Exercises in Pakistan, Nepal, South Sudan, and Uganda were conducted in 2020, which gave a preliminary finding about the child protection system and framework within each

country from a Safe to Learn Call for Action lens, more research is needed to be done looking at various groups including children with disabilities.[14]

   This study looks at the current child protection practices within schools in Punjab for all children, focusing on children with disabilities and how we can strengthen the system using an ecological systems approach and Safe to Learn Call for Action points.

Research Methodology

Research Strategy

To generate an in-depth understanding of child abuse and neglect and how we can improve the current system for protecting children with disabilities in schools, qualitative methodology was employed. A semi-structured interview allowed the researcher to gain a broader perspective and recommendations from the participants.

Data Collection Method (Primary/Secondary)

The study used a semi-structured in-depth interview methodology to gain insight into how school-based child protection systems can be developed. Ten interviews were conducted with experts from the field of special needs. Participants with at least five years of experience and a significant contribution to special education were considered experts. Years of experience working for/with children with disabilities ranged from 5 to 50 years. The participants were limited to three divisions of Punjab: Lahore, Multan, and Rawalpindi.

Type of participant	Number of Participants
Employed in Department of Special education in a decision making/ administrative role	3
Academia (assistant professor or above). Teaching professionals or teachers working with students with disabilities	4
Employed in private special education institute in a decision making/ administrative role	2
Employed in state commission for children in decision making, policy making role. With previous experience of working with children with disabilities/ directorate.	1

   The interview protocol, which consisted of semi-structured questions, was developed by the researcher using Safe to Learn global initiative themes, some questions about the participant's role, and general questions. Questions related to individual roles included those related to the participant's role/designation, their key responsibilities, and how they have been working in the field of disabilities. The general questions included

how they would define child abuse and neglect, how well they think children with disabilities are in their homes and schools, and how they think children with disabilities are at risk of child abuse and neglect. The rest of the questions were aligned with the themes addressed by the Safe to Learn global initiative, including a) implementation of policy and legislation, b)prevention and response strengthening, c)shift of social norms and behaviors, d) evidence generation and record keeping, e)investing resources effectively.

This protocol was validated by three experts from the field of special education with a Ph.D. in Special education. These experts only validated the interview protocol and did not participate in the research.

The researcher conducted Interviews individually at the participants' workplace during a time set by their choice. Interviews lasted between 45 and 80 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Urdu and English, the language of selection of the participants. It is noteworthy that all participants were numbered for confidentiality purposes.

Results
The key themes include: 1) Implementation of policy and legislation, 2) Response, 3) Shift in social norms and behavior change, 4) Evidence generation and record keeping, and 5) Investing resources effectively.

Overall Situation of Children with Disabilities
While the situation of children with disabilities was described as improving over time by most participants, the overall care standards were described as "neglected" (by Participant 5) and "not up to mark" (by Participant 6).

Participant 2 described in detail how the upbringing of children at an early age can be divided into a) family and b) school life. Neglect of a child with disability can be observed across all social strata; however, more specifically, it can be observed in poor class due to the unawareness of parents, whereas parents from the rich or elite are sometimes overprotective, creating hindrances to social inclusion. Parents from the middle-class tier are observed to be more concerned and balanced in their approach to care for a child with disabilities. A discrepancy can also be observed in various types of school settings. For example, schools in the public sector or those who are catering to children with disabilities in streets/ small private schools are observed to have more cases of abuse and neglect.

All participants reported that children with disabilities are more likely to be abused and neglected in their schools and at home. Some of the factors which contribute to their vulnerability are their support & dependency on caregivers (as described by Participants 1, 3), sometimes their limited understanding of complex behaviors (as defined by Participant 1), disinterest of parents when it comes to child with special needs (participant 4), gender (as defined by Participant 2), lack of systems to protect them (as defined by Participant 2) isolation and expression (as defined by Participants 9 and 6)

Implementation of Policy and Legislation

All participants said existing laws and legislation related to children's rights are poorly implemented. Participant 1 described that the "National policy for persons with disabilities was developed in 2002 followed by National Plan of Action. I believe it was a very well-thought-out and elaborated document. If the government had seriously focused on implementation, the situation might have been different". Participant 9 pointed out that following a writ petitioned by Syed Miqdad Mehdi, Government of Punjab, after an incident of child physical abuse in Daska, a Child Care Commission was formulated, which generated pervasive recommendation reports on topics of child protection, health, education, and inclusion. While many experts were involved in developing that report, drafted after the Lahore High Court order, the recommendations are yet to be implemented. Participant 1 also referred to this case and pointed out that she is "not sure if those recommendations were given form of a proper law or not"

Only one participant (participant 10) pointed out that "There is a legislation on corporal punishment titled "Prohibition of Corporate Punishment Act, 2023" applies to all children, including Children with Disabilities. Although legislation exists, its implementation is questionable. Particularly in the case of CWDs, it is further difficult to implement as, in many cases, these children cannot explain punishment even to their parents. The Monitoring / regulatory authorities should closely monitor teachers/ hostel staff to control corporal punishment". Other participants said they are unaware of proper legislation on corporal punishment in schools. Most participants pointed out that a notification had been sent out. Participant 3 pointed out that the "notification is still there to teach with love and not by hitting. That is a very old notification."

Prevention & Response strengthening

Sub-theme: Early Detection

Early detection was seen as a game changer for protecting children (as described by Participant 1).

Participants emphasized that the key stakeholders are parents and school staff, especially teachers. Participant 4 described that "if the teacher observes any changes in the child's usual behavior because a child spends a good portion of their day in school, then the teacher must be the first reporter. Participant 3, on the other hand, pointed at the role of a psychologist in early detection: "As the psychologists give sessions, including individual sessions, if they start performing their role in a better way, the detection is easily possible." However, "psychologists who work with children with hearing impairment need to be trained in sign language as currently most psychologists working even in deaf schools don't know sign language" (Participant 9).

Some of the possible suggestions to improve the early detection of child abuse and neglect included increasing the awareness of families through seminars (as described by Participant 3), proper training of school staff on detecting early signs or red flags (described by Participants 6 & 9), need of an appropriate policy in place (as described by participant 8 & 2), making children about body safety in accordance to the preferred mode of communication and intellectual capacity of the child (described by participant 1) and regular awareness sessions for everyone including students, school staff and parents (described by participant 8).

Sub-theme: Response

Once a case of child abuse and neglect has been detected or reported, "the response must be systematic and according to the policy which is defined rather than a knee-jerk reaction. There should be a designated staff member who should be responsible for anything related to protecting children, including coordinating and managing the case" (described by Participant 9). We also need to "minimize the communication gap" (described by Participant 6), take each complain or report seriously" (described by participant 2), taking a zero tolerance stance in severe cases (described by participant 6) and the "full team of the institution must be focused" (described by participant 3).

Other suggestions to improve response include: initial assessment, observing the child and getting to the root cause of the problem (described by Participants 1, 3 & 6), use of surveillance and technology to see who is

involved (described by Participants 1 & 7) and closely sensitively collaborating with parents (described by participant 1) and all suspicions should be dealt with seriously without any exceptions to the connections and influence of the perpetrator (described by participant 2).

Sub-theme: Reporting

All participants recognize the need for a formal reporting system which could include an authorized desk (described by Participant 1) with clear reporting channels (described by Participant 6) and should involve a complete team for it where ethical concerns such as confidentiality and trust are maintained (described by participant 3).

Other suggestions to improve reporting include: developing mechanisms that provide direct access to the student with administrative staff members (described by Participant 6), reporting should be done with details related to all aspects of the event, including time, frequency, duration, etc, and a proper standardized form/ checklist should be in place (described by Participant 7) and to encourage reporting from children they should be sensitized about the topic so much that they feel comfortable sharing this information (described by Participant 3).

Sub-theme: Referral

To improve overall case management, referral pathways need to be established. If the case is severe, home visits can be done by psychologists and social case workers. This case worker can be a social welfare officer who can work closely with the principal (described by Participant 6). As cases cannot be referred externally without the parent's consent, they need to be taken in confidence (described by Participant 7). If a school has a core child protection team, they can ensure close collaboration within the school and family and with other departments (described by Participant 1). Even though departments are working to protect children, e.g., the Welfare department, Child Protection and Welfare Bureau with the Human Rights Ministry, and the Department of Special Education, the coordination between them is currently frail. Hence, it needs to be strengthened (described by Participant 2).

Sub-theme: Prevention

Prevention is the key to protecting children from harm in any setting. It is not just the responsibility of the school but also the family and society at large (described by Participant 1). For this, it is essential to look at primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention (described by Participant 9), awareness

raising, training of staff, parents, and family member (described by participant all participants), inclusion of body safety and related components in curriculum and cocurricular activities (described by participant 2, 4) regulating screen usage of the child and their online activities (participant 2), vetting of all staff members who are working in the school premises, including background check, if they are fit to take care of children and if they have a basic understanding of human rights approach and social philosophy (described by Participant 2), installation of CCTV cameras everywhere (described by Participant 3) inclusion of child rights and child protection in pre-service teachers and professionals curriculum (described by participant 9). Clear SOPs for keeping children safe in all spaces of the school and in transport which would include the responsibility of an adult/ teacher at all times (described by Participant 4), use of IEC material and para flex/big posters with pictures in schools about what is child abuse and neglect and how can you prevent it (Participant 6).

Shift of Social Norms and Behaviors Choices
Schools can play a vital role in promoting positive parenting and positive disciplining by conducting seminars and disseminating information education communication (IEC) material (described by all Participants), use of WhatsApp groups and online platforms to share information (described by Participant 2), promoting parent-teacher meetings and developing a parent's guide for guidance on positive parenting (described by Participant 4), involvement of religious leaders and human rights supporters as guest speakers in seminars to promote positive parenting (described by Participant 5).

Schools can also play a vital role in the prevention of bullying, inappropriate relationships, and abuse of children. All participants recommended regular seminars and dissemination of IEC material. Other recommendations include holding interactive activities or campaigns within the schools, e.g., anti-bullying week (Participant 4), and applying a zero-tolerance policy towards bullying, abuse, and, in most cases, inappropriate relationships in and around school (described by Participant 5).

Evidence Generation and Record Keeping
None of the participants were aware of any formal registry maintained at the provincial or national level where incidents of child abuse and neglect were reported or recorded. Only one participant said that a registry is kept

in their school where all cases related to misconduct, discipline issues, and reported abuse were recorded. Participant 6 further explained that the registry also had incidents in which students' misbehavior with faculty members or any other unpleasant incident in the school was recorded.

Participant 10 pointed out that "a proper database system has been initiated at the Federal and Provincial level, which needs to be improved. Some work is being done in this regard."

All participants insisted that there is a dire need to maintain a database that includes all cases reported within the school premises. There should also be an offender's registry, which must be central but connected to all schools and departments with a record of all the offenders. This could help in the vetting of staff. (As described by Participant 9).

Investing Resources Effectively

Budget constraints contribute to the lack of protection of children, as pointed out by all participants. Nearly all participants pointed out that when a separate budget is defined, there needs to be separate heads for activities such as training and IEC material related to child rights and protection. However, some participants said that even though there is no budget allocation to child rights-related issues, the general will and priority to work on it still need to be included. So, with budget and resource allocation, stakeholders also need to work well on protecting children everywhere.

Discussion

With international commitments and frameworks, steps need to be taken in consideration of the sociocultural norms and values, the existing gaps and loopholes in the system, and the existing system's strengths. The recommendations by experts (participants) showed that with minor improvements within the current school system using a Safe to learn framework and child protection lens and with the introduction of activities such as training, awareness building, and formation of a child protection committees, there can be significant improvement to protect children in and outside schools.

Using Safe to Learn global initiative themes, a holistic approach can be taken to look at the prevention of violence against children in and around school. The perspectives from experts demonstrate that it is vital to build the capacity of all stakeholders, especially teachers, students, and parents, to aid early detection and prevention. Parents can be sensitized, and their

awareness can be built via sessions. In contrast, basic concepts of safeguarding and protection can be added to in-service and pre-service training curricula for teachers and professionals working directly with students.

While it can be seen that some work has been done on awareness raising, child protection response and referral mechanisms need to be strengthened. Steps need to be taken to improve early detection of a case, assessment, response, reporting, and reporting for a smooth system management of a case. If this process is followed through smoothly, the secondary trauma associated with child abuse and neglect via inappropriate questioning, victim blaming and shaming and unsystematic response can be minimized. Once a case has been reported, investigation should be paid attention to, but the support of the victim and their family also needs to be focused on and not forgotten when giving justice to the victim.

To keep a record of all human rights violations, including childhood abuse and neglect, data management systems need to be strengthened. It can be seen that there is no organized way to record cases of childhood abuse existing at provincial or national levels. Schools may have an ad-hoc approach to document cases, but this data is not shared anywhere. While it is essential to keep the victim's identity confidential, the perpetrator, especially if they are a school employee, should be held accountable, and to avoid transfers to other schools, an offender's registry should be maintained.

To develop any system, some resources need to be allocated and invested. However, many participants in the study pointed out that if there is will of the school management to work on child protection, the current funding and resource allocation is enough to start at least awareness building and essential management of child abuse and neglect cases.

Children with special needs require special attention. While the basic framework can be applicable to all students regardless of gender, age, and ability, small amendments and adjustments, such as trained psychologists who are proficient in sign language (for students with hearing impairment) and specially trained staff, including support staff, on how to handle children with physical disabilities, are important so the system is applicable to all.

Conclusion

This paper sheds light on the current system for protecting children with disabilities and expert recommendations for improving the system. A systematic, human rights and multidisciplinary approach must be taken to protect children everywhere, including in and outside schools. While in Pakistan, most cases of child abuse and neglect are seen as managed separately, mostly unsystematically, only focusing on perpetrator and reconciliation, a more systematic approach needs to be taken, keeping it a child-centered/victim-centered approach.[15]

End Notes

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