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TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT BULLYING AND THEIR HANDLING STRATEGIES IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to analyze the relationship between teachers' beliefs about bullying and their handling strategies in public secondary schools. Three research objectives were put forward to conduct this research. Convenient sampling technique was applied to select 60 public secondary schools from south of Punjab. The sample of available teachers was also selected through a convenient sampling technique. A sample of (300) teachers, including (150) males and (150) females was invited to participate in this research. Existing reliable and valid research instruments were utilized to collect data from teachers. Two questionnaires were adopted to collect data to measure teachers' beliefs about bullying and for identifying handling strategies. Descriptive statistics, simple linear regression and t-test were applied to analyze the data. The result of simple linear regression shows a moderate but significant relationship between teachers' beliefs and bullying handling strategies. As to bullying handling strategies, teachers reported multiple strategies used to handle bullying situations in schools. The means scores of item analysis showed that, the majority of teachers preferred to tolerate bullying behaviors, others believe in punitive actions, many teachers preferred to ignore such issues think that students can solve their matters by themselves. As to the t-test, the beliefs of both male and female teachers were found the same however the handling strategies of both male and female are different in their schools. Female teachers found more empathetic in contrast to their male colleagues.

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Introduction

One of the key elements of school climate is a healthy and conducive learning environment which is possible through the cooperation of all stakeholders. This helps to keep students focused on their learning to achieve educational goals (Sher & Inamullah, 2025). In contrast, a school where learning environment is not comfortable for teachers and students, schools cannot progress and lag in achieving educational goals (Afriadi & Fitri, 2023). Bullying is one of the key factors affecting the progress of teachers and students in secondary schools. Bullying is a purposeful activity to intimidate or humiliate someone (Yoon & Barton, 2008). In a school setting, it is a common issue in all schools, and it exists in its various forms (Olweus, et al., 2019). It poses a significant challenge to school administrators and teachers to overcome such issues at school and provide a productive environment for students to nurture their potential. Preventing bullying requires certain skills and training and also an awareness on these issues however, teachers' beliefs on bullying their handling strategies are also of great importance to overcome bullying in schools (Espelage, 2018). Beliefs refer to attitude and firm understanding on something, these beliefs shaped by various factors e.g., personal experience, professional training, and cultural background etc. and the overall approach to prevent bullying in schools (Dawes, et al., 2024). Understanding teachers' beliefs helped to develop certain handling strategies to prevent bullying (Smith, 2018). Empirical research shows that teachers' beliefs positively influence preventive measures, foster inclusive school climate and introduce intervention programs with bully and predator (Dawes, et al., 2024; Siddiqui, et al., 2023).

Teachers' Beliefs about Bullying

Bullying is a major concern in school settings because it involves behaviors that can affect students' safety, well-being and learning performance. There are various conceptualizations of bullying highlighting multiple dimensions and acts of bullying. However, most comprehensive conceptualization came from Olweus (2019) in the following way. Bullying is a negative action repeatedly directed towards a person who has difficulty defending it (Siddiqui, et al., 2023). Bullying is different than conflict between two students, where both are equally vocal to defend their arguments. However, bullying involves aggression and power imbalance that occur repeatedly (Smith, 2018). Power imbalance can be in form of physical strength and social status; these differences limit the target to resist the behavior of perpetrator (Olweus, et al., 2019). Students can be targeted by one or groups of students and face difficulty in defending themselves.

Teachers as frontline observers have crucial role in addressing bullying incidents in secondary schools. Teachers try to create a positive and supportive learning environment where learners feel safe and comfortable (Sher & Inamullah, 2025). Teachers' beliefs about bullying include their understanding, interpretations, causes, assumptions and consequences of victimization. Teachers' beliefs are important as dealing with bullying based on assumptions and interpreting incidents are not sufficient (Olweus, et al., 2019). Their existing knowledge and attitudes are important to interpret bullying incidents.

Bauman and Del Rio (2005) highlighted that there should be certain programs to develop teachers' capacities and knowledge to handle bullying situations. Thus, it needs to include this dimension in teachers' professional development programs to prepare teachers to handle such situations in their schools. It is important to sensitize teachers on bullying because when they recognize bullying as harmful behavior, they may be more inclined to intervene, provide support to targeted students, and take preventive action. Yoon and Kerber (2003) investigated teachers' responses to bullying situations and found that teachers' responses vary as per according to the nature of the incidents and the teachers' perceptions of the students involved. Another research Yoon (2004) demonstrated that teachers' attitudes towards bullying and their perceptions of their ability to intervene were associated with their intervention responses. These findings suggest that recognizing bullying as a serious problem is important, but teachers' beliefs about their own capacity to intervene may also matter. Teachers perceived responsibility also matters how much they realize their role to prevent bullying in school. This belief may influence whether teachers take an active role in addressing incidents or regard bullying as a matter that should primarily be managed by parents, school administrators, or the students themselves (Smith, 2018).

Hektner and Swenson (2012) examined teachers' perceptions of bullying in their study, their work highlights the importance of teachers' interpretations of bullying and the circumstances under which they feel responsible for intervening in such situations. Those teachers who consider such roles as part of their professional role handle such situations more seriously than others. However, responsibility alone may not be sufficient if teachers lack the confidence, knowledge, or institutional support needed to intervene effectively.

Another study by Troop-Gordon and Quenette (2010) investigated teachers' beliefs about bullying and their classroom management strategies. Their findings highlighted that beliefs about the nature of bullying were associated with the strategies teachers used to manage bullying situations. Teachers who considered bullying as normal behavior occurred among students were less likely to intervene. This means teachers' beliefs are not merely general attitude towards bullying rather it includes assumptions about dealing with it.

Types of Bullying

There are several forms of bullying, physical, verbal, relational and cyberbullying. Physical bullying involves hitting, kicking, pushing, and damaging the belonging of other students (Thompson & Smith, 2016). Bullying can occur through several forms of behavior, which may operate independently or in combination. While name-calling, threats, humiliating remarks, and teasing counts in verbal bullying. Relational bullying means spreading rumors, undermining someone's reputation and damaging social relationships of students through exclusion. Cyberbullying is nowadays more common and involves harassing others through digital environments (López-Castro et al., 2023). In a report published by (Hernández-Serrano. et al., 2025) highlighted that there are approximately one in three learners experiencing bullying at school, moreover the report further highlighted the continuing prevalence of bullying in educational settings. This shows bullying is a widespread concern and prevails in various forms and

consequences of bullying experienced by students. The consequences go beyond physical and emotional discomfort (Pettalia, 2013).

A systematic review and meta-analysis by Merrin, et al., (2024), which included 165 studies, identified a strong relationship between bullying victimization and a range of adverse health and psychosocial outcomes. The strongest evidence includes depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and behaviors. Bullying has also caused the school dropout rate, school adjustment and academic functioning. These consequences are relevant during adolescence, when peer relationships and social acceptance become important aspects of students' development. Kin (2026) in a systematic review of 28 studies, found that bullying victimization during early adolescence was related to subsequent psychological and academic difficulties, including depression, anxiety, peer rejection, poorer school performance, and reduced school connectedness (López-Castro et al., 2023).

The prevalence and consequences of bullying demonstrate that why teachers' beliefs and their handling strategies deserve further investigation (Khanolainen, et al., 2024). The role of teachers is critical to identify bullying, respond to incidents, and influence the social environment in which students interact with each other. Their role in reducing bullying and handling strategies may have implications for both immediate intervention and the broader school climate (Dawes, et al., 2024).

Bullying Handling Strategies

Teachers' handling strategies refer to the actions they take when they identify or respond to bullying incidents (Siddiqui, et al., 2023). These actions may include prevention, direct intervention, disciplinary measures, support for targeted students, referral to other professionals, or non-intervention. Preventive strategies aim to reduce the likelihood of bullying before it happens. Setting classroom rules, routines and procedures, promoting respectful relationships among students, monitoring interactions and encouraging students to report about bullying. In their systematic review and meta-analysis, Ttofi and Farrington (2011) found that structured prevention and intervention strategies could reduce bullying and victimization. Furthermore, preventive strategies also include developing students' social and emotional skills and safe and conducive classroom environment where students feel safe seeking help from teachers.

Intervention strategies are also very helpful when teachers are well trained to handle such issues, first they should be able to identify and then address these issues (Espelage, et al., 2018). Teachers may interrupt the behavior, establish what occurred, communicate expectations, and take steps to prevent further victimization of the student. As to disciplinary strategies, this includes warning, referral to school parents, imposing fine and sanctions etc. School must design these strategies to implement and communicate to all stakeholders at the beginning of the school year (Dawes, et al., 2024). This means, such behaviors are not acceptable and if happens school will take serious actions to reduce it. However, in serious situations, disciplinary actions may not address the underlying social relationships or provide sufficient support to students who have been targeted. This requires intervention by the teachers according to their perceived ability and attitudes. This indicates that the choice of intervention may be influenced not only by the incident itself but also by teachers' beliefs about their responsibility and capacity to manage the situation (Yoon, 2004).

Another significant action can be to provide support to such students by listening to them, consoling them, providing reassurance, monitoring their safety, and helping them access appropriate further support. Moreover, structured conversations with victims, repairing harm and rebuilding relationships where safe is called retrospective approaches. However, it depends on case to case to apply certain strategies (Burger, et al., 2015). Further approaches can be staying away from the situation by ignoring the perpetrator or managing the situation independently. In serious incidents, referral is another strategy to refer to seniors or school administration, counselors and parents to address the incident (Casas et al., 2015). These strategies are not necessarily equivalent. Referral may be an appropriate response when an incident exceeds a teacher's authority or requires specialized support. These findings suggest that teachers' handling strategies should be examined as distinct categories rather than treated as a single measure of effective or ineffective intervention (Siddiqui, et al., 2023).

Relationship between Teachers' Beliefs and Handling Strategies

Teachers' beliefs about bullying are certainly linked with teachers' bullying handling strategies. In fact, teachers' strategies depend on their behavior, assumptions, and attitude towards handling the issue. Thus, this is an established link, however the nature of adopting such strategies depends on the situation, nature of the incident and how wisely teachers handle it. Authors Troop-Gordon and Quenette, (2009) linked teachers' beliefs with classroom management strategies that contribute to reduce bullying in school.

Recently, Dawes et al. (2024) synthesized evidence from 27 studies, with 25 included in the meta-analysis. Their findings indicated that the relationship between teachers' anti-bullying attitudes and intervention responses varied according to the type of response and whether the study measured actual reported behavior or intentions to intervene. The review also found a positive relationship between anti-bullying attitudes and certain responses including disciplining bullying, supporting victims, and involving parents. However, the relationship was negative for some responses, such as encouraging avoidance, and unrelated to others (Smith, 2018). Research also proved that this relationship is complex because it does not necessarily mean that they will adopt every strategy considered appropriate for managing bullying.

Bullying in Pakistani Secondary Schools

When it comes to Pakistani public secondary school, bullying is an equally important concern as for other schools in the world. Local research on these variables has ocnfired the types of bullying as existing in international literature. Naveed et al., (2020) conducted a cross-sectional study of 2,315 with seventh class children in school in Pakistan. Their findings indicated that 26.6% of respondents reported being bullied at school, while 18.6% reported perpetrating bullying at school. The study also confirmed the relationship between bullying involvement and emotional and behavioral difficulties. These findings further confirm that bullying is not confined to isolated school settings and that both victimization and perpetration warrant attention in Pakistani schools. However, teachers are expecting difficulties in managing bullying in schools.

Naz and Mustansar (2026) investigated bullying behavior among 817 students in Grades 4–6 and found verbal victimization was the most frequently reported form of bullying followed by rumors and exclusion from social environment. The findings also identified physical and verbal bullying among students who perpetrated bullying. Salman (2021) further confirmed these results in their study. Their findings indicated that humiliating remarks and verbal abuse were common forms of bullying. Another study conducted by Naveed et al. (2023) measuring the handling strategies of teachers to manage bullying, the study found that teachers reported using a range of strategies, with disciplinary approaches being particularly common. Together, these studies demonstrate the importance of investigating bullying in Pakistani schools and provide a foundation for examining teachers' beliefs and reported handling strategies.

Research Objectives

The following objectives were designed to conduct this research to study:

- To analyze the relationship between teachers' beliefs about bullying and their bullying handling strategies in the public secondary schools.
- To identify bullying handling strategies by teachers at public secondary schools.
- To map the difference between male and female teachers in relation to their beliefs about bullying and handling strategies.

Research Procedure

The study aims to analyze the relationship between teachers' beliefs about bullying and their handling strategies in public secondary schools. A quantitative research approach was adopted to conduct this study. A survey was conducted to collect data from secondary school teachers utilizing existing research questionnaires, Bullying Attitude Questionnaire used for measuring teachers' beliefs about bullying and for handling bullying strategies, Handling Bullying Questionnaire was adopted. The data was collected from teachers who were teaching class 9th and 10th at public secondary schools in south Punjab. Convenient sampling technique was adopted to select school and available teachers to participate in this research. The collected data was entered into SPSS for analysis. Descriptive statistics, simple linear regression and t-test were applied to analyze the data. All the ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the research process.

Population and Sample

The population of this study comprises of all secondary school teachers teaching in government schools located in south Punjab. From these schools 60 schools were selected through convenience sampling considering the time and resources available for this research. It was assured to formulate a sample representing both groups of gender; thus 30 boys and 30 girls' schools were targeted for this research. Taking into account the budget for research and time, researchers opted this sampling technique to select schools and draw out the sample of teachers. From this sample, all secondary school teachers teaching class nine and tenth were invited to participate in this research. The total

sample was based on 300 teachers from both male and female school, 150 from each group of teachers.

Research Instruments

Existing literature was reviewed to find out the best suited research instruments for data collection, the validity, reliability, language, contextual fit and length of questionnaire was considered to select the research instruments. Craig et al., (2000) developed a Bullying Attitude Questionnaire which was found to be the best fit for this research to collect responses by engaging participants in a situation to record actual responses of the participants. This questionnaire comprised of 18 vignettes. Three questions were asked against each vignette. As to the scale of the questionnaire, one question was based on dichotomous, the other two were designed on 5-point Likert type scale. Each participant was presented with six vignettes. The questionnaire is attached to appendix-A.

As to measuring the bullying handling strategies, the Handling Bullying Questionnaire developed by Bauman et al., (2008). The questionnaire consisted of 22 items. Items were designed on 5-point Likert scale ranging between I definitely wouldn't and I definitely would. Both questionnaires were found highly reliable, the reported reliability for bullying attitude questionnaire was (.810), while the handling bullying questionnaire scale has a (.819).

Data Collection

Data were collected from secondary school teachers. Before inviting teachers to participate in research, the researcher visited the school principals to take formal permission from them to allow their teachers to participate in research. The researcher shared the objectives of the research, methods to collect data from teachers and shared information about data reporting and storage. After taking formal permission from the principals, the researcher contacted the teachers and shared the same information with them. Moreover, to guide them teachers about the questionnaires and scales, researchers explained the vignettes and related items. It took almost 15-40 minutes to fill out the questionnaires. The qualifications of teachers ranged between Bachelors and M. Phil, they were holding positions such as subject specialist, subject teacher, educators etc. Their working experience in school ranges between 05-15 years and their average age was between 25-50. All the ethical considerations were ensured throughout the research process e.g., respect for participants and their opinion, confidentiality of data. The names of the participants will not be published anywhere in the thesis. And the data will be stored in a safe and secure place.

Data Analysis

The data collected through both questionnaires were entered into SPSS. After cleaning of data, descriptive statistics were calculated for initial analysis. Later, simple linear regression was applied to see how teachers' beliefs contribute to teachers' handling bullying strategies. Moreover, independent-samples t-tests were conducted to analyze gender differences in male and female teachers' beliefs about bullying and their strategies for handling bullying in public secondary schools.

Results

Descriptive Statistics of the Variables

Table, 1: Descriptive Statistics of the Variables

Variable name	Mean score	Std. Deviation
Gender	1.50	.50
Qualification	2.06	.74
Experience	2.68	1.01
Teachers' Beliefs	3.41	.33
Handling Bullying Strategies	3.96	.62

N=300

Table 1 presents the demographic information of the research participants and descriptive statistics of the variables. The table shows the mean score for gender was (M=1.50; SD=.50), which was coded into two categories, male and female. The average qualification of teacher was (M=2.06; SD=.74), the average experience of secondary school teachers was (M=2.68; SD=1.01), the higher standard deviation shows the variability in experience of participants. As to the variable teachers' beliefs, teachers rate their beliefs at (M=3.41; SD=.33), which shows a little variation in results of teachers' beliefs. As to teachers' bullying handling strategies (M=3.96; SD=.62) with moderate variation in results.

Relationship between Teachers' Beliefs and Handling Bullying Strategies

A simple linear regression analysis was applied to analyze whether teachers' beliefs about bullying significantly predicted their handling bullying strategies. The results showed a significant relationship between the two variables ($R = .322$, $R^2 = .103$, adjusted $R^2 = .100$). The regression model was found statistically significant, $F(1, 298) = 34.38$, $p < .000$, indicating that teachers' beliefs significantly predicted their handling bullying strategies. The model explained 10.3% of the variance in handling bullying strategies. Moreover, the regression coefficient also showed that teachers' beliefs had positive and significant predictive relationship with bullying handling strategies ($B = .604$, $SE = .103$, $\beta = .322$, $t = 5.864$, $p < .000$). This suggests that a one-unit increase in teachers' beliefs score was associated with a .604 unit increase in the predicted bullying handling strategies. The results show that teachers beliefs about bullying were found relatively moderate but significant for predicting bullying handling strategies.

Handling Strategies for Bullying

Though the relationship between teachers' beliefs and handling bullying strategies was positive, another objective of this research was to identify the certain bullying strategies which teachers

found more useful while handling such incidents in their schools. Handling bullying questionnaire was analyzed, means and standard deviation of 22 items were calculated independent the most and least used strategies by teachers. We will report the top five strategies which teachers used most to handle bullying in their schools. A majority of the teachers rated that they would tolerate such behavior in their schools (M=4.31; SD=0.72). Many teachers rated that teachers should punish the bully (M=4.28; SD=0.90). Moreover, teachers also rated the following item quite higher to stop bullying at school to build a positive learning environment (M=4.20; SD=0.94). In contrast, many teachers rated the following item quite higher than someone else to sort out the issue (M=3.54; SD=1.39). More interestingly, many teachers ignore such issues as they showed their response (M=3.56; SD=1.35). Similarly, some teachers (M=3.59; SD=1.35) think that students can solve their matters by themselves.

Results of Independent Sample t-test

An independent sample t-test was applied to measure weather male and female teachers' beliefs and bullying strategies in public secondary schools are different. The following table 2, presents the results of the independent sample t-test:

Table 2, Results of Independent Sample t-test

Variables	Gender	Mean	SD	Sig.	t	df
Teachers' Beliefs	Male	3.40	.32	.63	-0.76	298
	Female	3.43	.33			
Bullying Handling Strategies	Male	3.87	.66	.00	-2.64	298
	Female	4.05	.56			

N=300, Male=150, Female=150, p=0.05

Table 2, The table presents the results of independent-samples t-tests comparing male and female teachers' beliefs about bullying and their strategies for handling bullying. Female teachers (M = 3.43, SD = 0.33) reported slightly higher mean scores on beliefs about bullying than male teachers (M = 3.40, SD = 0.32). However, the difference was not statistically significant, t (298) = −0.76, p = .63, indicating that male and female teachers held similar beliefs about bullying

As to handling bullying strategies, female teachers (M =4.05, SD =.56) reported higher mean scores than male teachers (M = 3.87, SD = .66). This difference was also statistically significant (298) = -2.64, p=.00, indicating that female teachers reported greater use of bullying handling strategies than male teachers. Overall, the findings suggest that although gender was not significantly associated with teachers' beliefs about bullying, it was significantly associated with their reported handling strategies.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study aimed to identify the relationship between teachers' beliefs and handling bullying strategies in public secondary schools in three districts of south Punjab. The study found a moderate but significant relationship between teachers' beliefs and handling bullying strategies in public secondary schools. A study conducted by Khanolainen, et al., (2024) about teachers' beliefs and their characteristics to cultivate a positive learning environment in schools. They conclude that teachers' beliefs to build a safe and inclusive school environment play a key role in school climate. These study results are consistent in view of this research that teachers' beliefs shape up the school environment and when it comes to managing bullying these beliefs become more important to handle such behaviors in schools. In line with this, research conducted by authors Dawe, et al., (2024), in their meta-analytic review they have identified teachers' attitude towards bullying and their interventive responses. They have identified significant results when applying such interventive strategies to control bullying behavior which is in accordance with this research however we did not measure in view of intervention but from managing bullying perspective which includes various strategies of bullying. Van Gils, et al., (2023) conducted their research measuring teachers' bullying among students. Their research found significant results that how teachers' conceptions about bullying shape up their future actions. This is in accordance with our study results that teachers' handling strategies are dependent on their beliefs.

As to handling bullying strategies, a study conducted by Siddiqui, et al., (2023) focuses on teacher handling bullying practices also found the same results that teachers used a variety of handling strategies in school to control bullying. Teachers believe that punitive measures must be considered to handle bullying in schools. These results were also confirmed by the following studies which are completely aligned with this study (Patchin & Hinduja, 2018; Ahmed et al., 2022). The other objective of our research was to analyze whether male and female teachers are different in their beliefs and handing strategies. Our study found that male and female have same beliefs about bullying however they are different in managing bullying in their schools. There could be many reasons for this difference however, our study results and consistent with Gomes et al., (2022), who found significant difference in male and female teachers' strategies and beliefs to handle bullying in their schools. They have found that female teachers are more empathetic than male teachers, this is further confirmed by the study results of Rohman, et al., (2024), who have found that the awareness of teachers in managing bullying in schools matters a lot. In this regard female teachers are more aware and kinder to handle such matters which are consistent with this study results. Female teachers handle better in bullying incidents in contrast to male teachers in public secondary schools.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The main objective of this research was to analyze the teachers' beliefs and handling strategies to reduce bullying in public secondary schools. The study tried to fill the existing gaps in research, however there are certain limitations which need to be acknowledged. The study focuses on teachers' beliefs and handling strategies; both variables were utilized from teachers' perspective however the perspectives of students and victims of bullying were missing in this study. Future research can involve students and particularly victims of bullying, they can better explain the role

of their teachers in how they are handling bullying incidents. Next, this quantitative study collected data from teachers which only provides you with certain items to rate their preferences through vignettes however qualitative methodology can better explain the bullying incidents in schools and their handling strategies. Thus, future research can follow mixed-methods research to study the problem from various perspectives. This will help to analyze the data more deeply and will infer better results to develop certain intervention programs for bullying victims and for preparators. As to the generalizability of the results, the results of this study might not be generalized to other contexts specifically in upper Punjab and other provinces of Pakistan. South Punjab has a specific context where feudalism exists deeply and affects the thinking of people, moreover, a conservative and narrow-minded also exists that reflect from the behavior of people. Thus, future research can also consider such ground realities to conduct research on bullying and also expand the scope of research to generalize the results to other parts of the country.

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