Strategies for Mitigating School Violence in Conflict Zones: The Perspective of Secondary School Teachers of Former FATA-Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the practical measures undertaken by teachers to prevent violence among students. Such violence among students is based on persistent terrorism, extremism, and socio-political conflicts in the region. A qualitative intrinsic case study design was used, where 25 participants, comprising five School Heads and Twenty Secondary School Teachers were selected for interviews. An open-ended interview guide was used for participants selected through a purposive and convenience sampling technique. The primary data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis to identify themes. The study findings reveal that training about preventive measures, arranging debates and stage dramas about peace, ensuring a pluralistic classroom environment, enhancing teachers' authority to overcome violent behaviour, understanding the behaviour of students and community by arranging PTC meetings, and declaring the classroom as a unified community are effective strategies applied by School Heads and Teachers to modify the behaviour of students and increase capacity building. The paper concludes that violence in schools has a complex solution that comprises empowerment of teachers, involvement of the community, and implementation of overall governance reforms.

Keywords: School Violence, Peacebuilding strategies, Peace Education, Conflict, Qualitative Research.

Introduction

A teacher is considered a counsellor and motivator who determines the future of a nation worldwide. Teacher status in Pakistan, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, faces several issues in general, including terrorism, extremism, militancy, and external pressure. After the merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the status of FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Area) has also changed, and it has merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa under the 25th Amendment Act in 2018. The former FATA has experienced long-standing historical, political, economic, and security exploitation regarding administration, resource distribution, developmental projects,

governance issues (Khan et al., 2024), and representation at both national and international levels. Moreover, due to the exploitation of the erstwhile FATA, one of the institutions has been severely affected, namely educational institutions, by terrorist and extremist groups, which created fertile ground for violent events. Students were affected by dropping out of school and working somewhere for financial support for their families; they also faced displacement, or in some cases, a child was also vulnerable to extremist groups for recruitment purposes.

The prevention of violence in schools entails a multifaceted strategy, encompassing teacher empowerment and the development of a positive educational environment, along with effective ways for addressing violence in conflict-prone locations. Discipline is essential in schools; therefore, teachers must be granted the right to take necessary actions, including the removal of students who exhibit aggressive behaviour. Educators ought to be granted this authority. Ciuladiene and Kairiene (2017) emphasise that inadequate conflict management may exacerbate students' psychosocial issues, including hostility and anxiety. This underlines the need to ensure that instructors have the means to deal with disagreements. Saiti (2015) states that consistency in practices among school personnel is important and that it can contribute to improved conflict management and a healthy school climate.

Educational settings should be conducive since they help to mitigate violence. These objectives can be achieved by activities that increase knowledge, such as preparing pamphlets, conducting significant seminars to educate teachers and students on how to resolve conflicts. Change agents should be embraced by the education stakeholders to bring social cohesion and harmony within institutions. In addition, students should be given fair chances during enrolment since this will reduce the development of rivalries due to perceived inequalities. This highlights the importance of equal access to enrolment (Rubagiza et al., 2016).

It is necessary to introduce specific strategies to deal with all violent problems in the conflict zones. Some examples of such efforts are the establishment of parent-teacher councils, the creation of clear policies in regard to ex-tribal areas, and community participation in dispute management. The paper addresses the relevance of community involvement in conflict resolution and indicates that community stakeholders can play a vital role in responding to community issues in assemblies (Khalid, 2024). Such community involvement is critical in the development of trust and cooperation between all parties involved.

Despite these attempts, teachers have to face significant issues, including feelings of demotivation caused by external factors, including troubles in the community and insufficient socialisation among learners with family backgrounds. These are not easy obstacles to overcome. The failure of civil administration and law enforcement in addressing violent situations is also a problem that adds complexity to the situation in schools. Teachers may also believe that they are confined in their work because of their primary concern that revolves around school-specific issues, as opposed to addressing issues prevalent within the community (Council et al. 2022). The possible impact of this restriction is that they will become more challenged in solving conflicts successfully.

The absence of conflict resolution conversations in schools is another element that may lead to the continuation of a violent cycle. As teachers are known to play a huge role in shaping students' attitudes about conflict resolution, they must be encouraged to take part in such

conversations. Thapa (2015) asserted that unresolved disagreements might adversely affect the teaching and learning process, perhaps resulting in an escalation of violent behavior.

Literature

Peacebuilding is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that requires efforts and role-playing by each and every stakeholder of society. Like other stakeholders, students are also an important segment of society, whose socialization responsibility lies on the shoulders of their parents and teachers. Hence, along with education, it is also important to develop the skills and personality of students to manage conflicts efficiently. Such training needs to be a whole-of-education process towards peacebuilding, and this means training, campaigns to raise awareness, and systematic teacher training (Ndiku, 2021). Datzberger (2017) also stressed that peace education has to be a part of a formal one and that there has to be a standard in the training of peacebuilding competencies and conflict resolution as a teacher, too. Indeed, for example, in the case of Uganda, the adjusted and targeted strategies towards the non-formal education programmes have shown that such education programmes could avoid the issue-specific conflicts of the country and undertake the social change.

According to Vanner et al. (2017), in the framework of the post-conflict environment, like in Afghanistan or South Sudan, the opportunity to incorporate the educational resources that focus on peace has demonstrated its ability to transform social attitudes and to promote inclusivity, mutual understanding, cohesion, and peacebuilding. Rubagiza et al. (2016) argue that the structural challenges remain critical: enrolment and education capacities are an essential way to alleviate the unequal social situation and prevent local disputes. The trajectory of capacity-building initiatives and the facilitation of learning opportunities significantly influence the establishment of a foundation for the implementation of long-term peace-building processes.

Tunnisa et al. (2021) discovered that it is vital to empower administrators and teachers to resolve disputes in schools. To effectively address it, teachers must be given the right to speak to disciplined students or their colleagues. The headmasters should also have the power to send students and employees away to places (the same could be applied in Formre FATA, where their authority is needed to restore order and discipline). Thus, the importance of authority lines that are clearly spelled out to manage conflict in the learning setting cannot be ignored.

Ali et al. (2020) reported that the absence of effective rules and structures has turned the merger of FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to become an uphill task after its merger. There are widely laid down rules that transcend administrative consolidation, highlighted in a deluge of research. The transferring and posting of teachers, laws addressing land registration, court activities, and aiming at harmonising the old *Jirga* system with contemporary legislations are encompassed. The missing structures place the population of FATA in a lack of governance. Concerning the necessity to incorporate FATA reforms, there should be strategic measures to achieve long-term stability and effective governance, and that will be a step closer to alleviating the short-term issues that can bring down the development of the region (Khan, 2021).

Therefore, it is possible to say that, despite the external pressures and turbulences, teachers play the mediator and promoters of peacebuilding in war zones (Noor et al., 2015). Lastly, it

has been researched that education should provide them (educators) with the means and power to address the issues of the school, including conflicts and external violence. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Parent Teacher Councils (PTCs) have successfully resulted in effective collaboration between educators, parents, and community leaders, which has been used to tackle the issues, improve the state of schools, and promote peace education (Noor et al., 2015).

The concept of structured decision making, or, in the case of Kenya, the Life Skills Curriculum, involves teachers who have been well-trained in order to teach learning institutions skills in conflict resolution and promoting social cohesion. By enhancing the ability of schools as safe and non-discriminatory spaces to aid sustainable stability in society (Ndiku, 2021), peaceful building committees and societal engagement are objectives of joint strategies. Although teachers form the core of the curative of peace and social cohesion in conflict-ridden areas, the latter, in some cases, is obstructive to involvement of teachers in encouragement of tranquilly and social unity as a consequence of structural and governmental obstacles. Even though the educators focus on learning, mentoring, or socialisation, land disputes in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are not resolved, and ambiguous rules and regulations following the merger also limit their functionality (Shahab and Ullah, 2021).

Rubagiza et al. (2016) found that the political issues and land disputes, in particular, those affecting schools, provoke the need to have a proper administration and community-based peacebuilding efforts. In the process of peacebuilding, educators and spiritual leaders play a very important role, as they affect cultural standards and the understanding of intergroups. In Pakistan and Uganda, the use of peace education has successfully helped teachers to reduce conflicts and promote reconciliation in their practices. Such efforts underscore the critical need to have concerted efforts between governments, teachers, and society leaders to bring about lasting peace and stability (Halai and Durrani, 2018).

According to Ndiku (2021), the development of the capabilities of teachers in professional development based on peace education is useful in filling gaps in the establishment of harmony and resilience in learning institutions, as observed by programmes like the Kenya Life Skills Curriculum. Such efforts have to be supplemented by community collaboration and family support since socialisation is the shared responsibility of parents, society, and schools. These structures should be enhanced in order to ensure that schools in conflict regions can participate in peacebuilding and social development (Halai and Durrani, 2018).

Research Questions
What practical strategies do Secondary School Teachers apply for preventing violence among students?

Research Objectives
To determine effective strategies and interventions applied by Secondary School Teachers to mitigate violence among students.

Methodology
This section outlines the methodologies and techniques the researchers used to carry out this investigation. It explains the population, sampling methodologies, sample size, data collection

instruments, and data analysis protocol. The researchers employed a qualitative methodology using an intrinsic case study design to explore practical strategies that teachers use as mitigative measures for violence prevention among students in line with the recommendations of Creswell (2017).

Creswell (2017) posited that the sample size in qualitative research should be neither excessively large nor excessively small but rather maintained at an ideal or optimal level. The researchers employed purposive and convenient sampling techniques for choosing the participants. In-depth interviews were performed with 25 participants, comprising five School Heads and twenty Secondary School Teachers from each of the five sub-sections[i]/Quom[ii] of Dara Adam Khel. Alam et al. (2014) identified that there are five sub-sections/*Qoms* of Dara Adam Khel, such as Tor Chapar, Akhorwal, Sheraki Zarghon Khel, and Bosti Khel. The average time of the individual interview ranged from thirty minutes to one hour, depending upon the depth of material and the interviewee's willingness to disclose. The researchers also documented field notes during the interviews and audio-recorded the sessions with the participants' agreement, in accordance with Neuman's (2013) standards.

All ethical standards were considered when doing the research. Thematic analysis, which included translating and transcribing the data and selecting themes for interpretation, was used to examine the gathered data. Braun and Clarke (2006) identified six processes in thematic analysis: getting familiar with the data, assigning initial codes, selective coding, categorization, and theme generation.

Discussions

The findings of this study highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of violence among school students in conflict-affected regions like the former FATA. Teachers' insights revealed that school violence is not only the result of interpersonal rivalries among students but is also embedded in the broader socio-political and cultural context of the region, which is based on years of militancy, resource conflicts, and structural neglect. These conditions have fostered an environment where fear, misunderstandings, and aggression not only spilled among communities but also spilled over into school settings, undermining both teaching and learning.

It is worth mentioning that participants of the study emphasized that strategies to mitigate school violence are of prime importance to cope with challenges of insecurity, militancy, and weak institutional support. These strategies underscore the need for context-specific, primary interventions that concurrently address classroom dynamics, strengthen teachers' capacity, and build trust between schools and their surrounding communities.

No. 01: Training about preventive measures regarding counselling, rehabilitation, and mentoring violent students is among the basic needs of teachers.

"I believe that training and teaching ought to be conducted in combination. Peshawar University has recently opened a department of peace and conflict studies. Due to this, practitioners are to be invited, and various kinds of training are to be performed. We must

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[i] *Five subsections/Quom are present in Dara Adam Khel.*

[ii] *Quom refers to a collection of families that share a same identity.*

also arrange exposure trips for students to those organizations working for and teaching peace. (Participant no. 4: Saeed Khan, 16 Feb 2024).

No. 02: The role of peaceful debates among students is also significant for peacebuilding.

"I have always tried my best to bring peace among students both in and outside the class. I discourage those debates (such as political, sub-sectional, and religious) that can lead to conflicts among students. I encourage students' debates over the effectiveness of dialogue, forgiveness, justice, the role of students for peace, and the rule of law to enable them to play a role in peace within and outside the school." (Participant no. 01: Mohd. Ali, 23 Jan 2024)*.*

No. 03: Ensuring a pluralistic classroom environment where all students can freely express their opinions creates understanding and increases the capacity of the students to be peaceful and conformist.

I believe I have found the solution to the question, which is reflected in a quotation I remember: 'Education is the real remedy for social evil.' Ensure that education is accessible to all. I always try to create a safe classroom environment for everyone in my class where they (i.e., students) can freely express their opinions. I have also requested management to ensure that everyone understands the significance of governmental property, especially educational institutions, and to refrain from discussing any local/Quomi or political issues in the schools. (Participant no. 16: Nadeem Khan, 13 April 2024)*.*

No. 04: Enhancing teachers' authority to report deviant students also promotes peace in the school.

"I believe in discipline and the rule of law in school. I always ensure discipline by taking disciplinary measures with full authority against students and teachers who violate peace. I refer such cases to the school discipline committee or follow official channels, such as district education officers, for taking necessary action." (Participant no. 18: Mohd. Khan, 21 May 2024)*.*

No. 05: The Parents Teachers' Council is an effective tool to understand the behaviour of students and community tension that negatively affects a school.

"The most appropriate plan will be a Parent-Teacher Council (PTC) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to bring peace to areas like Dara. I encourage such meetings in our school, aiming to provide a platform for parents to highlight the student's behaviour, their intention, or any form of community tensions that may affect the school environment." (Participant no. 05: Zubair Khan, 05 March 2024).

No. 06: I always emphasize that "a classroom is a unified community" irrespective of outside rivalries.

"Our schools are usually adversely affected by land disputes and political conflict. One of the issues that caused the separation of the classes into two was a dispute regarding land. Upon returning to the classroom and enquiring about what had occurred, I realised that the classroom was split up due to the land conflict that took place between communities. In such a situation, I develop class norms of respect, cooperation, and kindness. I support and appreciate those who play an active role in ensuring such norms by awarding cash/trophies as a token of appreciation." (Participant no. 07: Zubair Khan, 21 March 2024).

Conclusions

This study was conducted to explore the teachers' strategies for capacity building of students in terms of peacebuilding in the erstwhile FATA. The regions face violence, extremism, and

social-political tensions, which profoundly impact not only overall peace but educational institutions as well. The role of all stakeholders is important; however, teachers' role is of prime importance because they have direct interaction with the youth, as they constitute the majority of the population, and their vulnerabilities to becoming a part of violent groups.

The study findings demonstrate that peacebuilding and overcoming violent behaviour among students located in conflict-affected regions require a multifaceted and context-sensitive approach. Some of the primary strategies for developing peaceful personalities are based on training sessions on preventive measures, coupled with interactive activities such as debates and stage dramas, which have proven effective in sensitising students toward peace-building values. Ensuring a pluralistic and inclusive classroom environment further contributes to mutual respect, tolerance, and the acceptance of diversity. The empowerment of teachers through enhanced authority to address and manage violent behaviour not only strengthens classroom discipline but also enables timely interventions. Moreover, consistent engagement with parents and the broader community through Parent Teacher Council (PTC) meetings fosters a collective responsibility for understanding students' behaviour and community tensions.

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