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Knowledge and Attitude towards Child Abuse among General and Special Education School Teachers: A Comparative Cross-Sectional Study

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Abstract

Child abuse adversely affects the lives of innumerable children across the world. It manifests physically, emotionally and/or sexually. Child protection systems are comparatively strengthened in developed countries, but developing and underdeveloped countries are still struggling. Teachers can play a significant role in protecting children from maltreatment. The current study intended to understand the knowledge and attitude of general and special education schoolteachers toward child abuse. The current study also investigated the difference in knowledge and attitude of the teachers regarding child abuse in the public and private schools. For this purpose, descriptive design was employed and quantitative survey was carried out to identify the differences in knowledge and attitude of general and special education teachers regarding child maltreatment. Sample (N=218) was selected from general and special education schools in Lahore through convenience sampling. Data were collected from teachers through an adapted questionnaire, originally developed by UNICEF. A significant positive correlation was found between knowledge and attitudes regarding child abuse, $r(216) = .27$, $p < .01$, indicating that higher levels of knowledge were associated with more positive attitudes and vice versa. This finding underscores the importance of knowledge in shaping favorable attitudes among community.

Keywords: Child maltreatment, Abuse, Neglect, Knowledge and Attitude regarding Maltreatment, Child Protection

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INTRODUCTION

Child Maltreatment is considered a worldwide problem, adversely affecting millions of children around the globe (Massullo et al., 2023). Child abuse can have profound and lasting impacts on a child's development and well-being. Child abuse refers to all forms of neglect, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, as well as any other form of maltreatment that harms the development, health, or dignity of a child (WHO, 2020). Some forms of child abuse include sexual exploitation, neglect, emotional abuse, and physical abuse. These forms of child abuse always critically damage the short-term and long-term well-being of a child. The effect of abuse is often sudden and continues into adulthood but mostly is linked with social malfunction, developmental delay, and mental disorder (Widom, 2022).

Child abuse and neglect have many consequences, especially its effects on children with disabilities cannot be overlooked. These effects are often long-term and detrimental to child's physical and mental health (Austin et al., 2020). Literature suggests that most of the reported perpetrators are caregivers and belong to the immediate families of the child. It is the general perception that parents who abuse their children don't love them, however work of Dr Henry Kemp who is considered father of the study of child abuse and neglect shows that this is not true in all cases. Often parents treat their children how they have been treated in their childhood by their parents (Zafar et al., 2021).

Abusing the child is an issue that causes concern all over the world. No one is left unaffected, whether in terms of culture, social system, or economic status. In the world, reported data in 2023 through WHO, around a billion children between 2 and 17 years had faced violence or negligence (De La Sablonnière-Griffin et al., 2021). According to NGO Sahil, over 3,000 child abuse cases were reported for the first half of the calendar year 2022, which likely and sadly understates the scope of the situation due to societal stigma and underreporting. Nearly half of the children in Pakistan face some form of physical or psychological abuse at home, school, or community (UNICEF, 2020). Because the teachers play a critical role in monitoring and safeguarding the children, the teachers' perception of child abuse, as well as their perception and practices

about it, will be vital in providing a base for decisions on how best to prevent and intervene appropriately.

Knowledge of Teachers about Child Abuse

Knowledge perspective and understanding are fundamental for educators to detect and address potential signs regarding child abuse. Most of their time, they spend with the children in learning centers, and thus, teachers are always ahead in identifying signs of abuse. Teachers with professional training in child abuse reporting are in a better position to report physical, sexual, emotional or neglect cases (Fang et al., 2022). However, findings remain unsurprising that the majority of instructors in Pakistan and in other countries lack preparedness to identify cases of child abuse (Ahmad et al., 2020).

Pakistan still has a very low level of awareness regarding the warning signs and symptoms of child abuse. This field of knowledge needs to be expanded in the majority of rural and underdeveloped areas. The majority of educators are unaware of emotional neglect and other types of abuse. Ahmad et al. (2020) state that these are still concealed and unreported.

Furthermore, cultural norms surrounding child discipline and corporal punishment will make it even harder to identify abuse because educators may misinterpret these norms as abuse. Teachers are likely to underreport cases involving abuse because they lack the necessary knowledge and training, which puts more children at risk of experiencing additional abuse (Goldman et al., 2015).

As they seek to identify abuse indicators in children with disabilities, special education teachers will likely face even more difficulties. As a result of their cognitive and linguistic deficits, children with disabilities do not display the traditional indicators of maltreatment. Rather, this would make it more difficult for educators to differentiate between abuse and behaviors associated with the child's handicap (Ishaque, 2022).

Attitudes of Teachers regarding Child Abuse

Teachers' attitudes regarding children determine whether or not

they report suspected incidents. There is proof that teachers' likelihood of disclosing child abuse is significantly influenced by their perceptions of the severity and frequency of such incidents. Teachers are more likely to report instances of child abuse if they believe the problem is severe and widespread (Crenshaw et al., 2018). On the other hand, individuals are less inclined to report cases of probable child abuse if they lack the impression that it happens regularly or that reporting it makes any difference (Levi et al. 2019).

Cultural aspects in Pakistan shape teachers' understanding of the need to report child abuse cases. Retaliation or damage to the family's honor is the most common barrier to reporting abuse, along with the belief that school authorities or child protective services are unlikely to help anyone (Wang et al., 2025). Teachers also face major dilemmas where corporal punishment as a cultural norm could be exempted. This provides further hurdles in assessment of teachers to ascertain if these actions could also qualify as abuse and this leads to undue delay in reporting these actions (Ahmad et al., 2020). Such problems underscore the importance of training that is appropriate to the local context so as to enhance teachers' understanding and address the emotional and social barriers that may hinder them from making reports.

Role of Teachers and Schools in Child Protection

Münger and Markström (2019) highlighted role of a school setting in preventing violence against children, suggesting that child protection mechanism should be very clear in any school setting so that each member knows about his responsibility and the role he has to play in child protection. They also highlighted the gap in child protection systems and school management.

Chan et al. (2018) suggested a relationship between school environments and vulnerability towards Violence against Children in children with special needs, reflecting that protective environments make children with disabilities less vulnerable towards abuse and neglect. Oluka and Egbo (2014) highlights the importance of teachers and other professionals in schools for the identification and management of child abuse. They also reported that awareness should be created among teachers regarding differences in exercising abuse and disciplining the students in

school. Therefore, the current study was conducted to find out knowledge and attitude of teachers regarding child abuse in general and special education schools.

Punjab Child Protection Policy (2025) affirms that school education department should ensure a safe learning environment as well as safe passage to and from schools for all children, including children with special needs (Child Protection and Welfare Bureau, 2025). This assures high responsibility on school management and reinforces the significance of training of school personnel in protecting children from violence. Reporting abuse by special education teachers may have further issues, as focus of special education teachers is more on the behavioral problems that come with the disability, so indicators of abuse may be overlooked (Massullo et al., 2023). Conversely, they would be slow to report cases of abuse since they are not sure if the behavioral changes observed are manifestations of a child's disability or some extraneous condition such as abuse (Sibanda & Masinga 2025). This is essentially why training programs that teach teachers the difference between behaviors due to disability and those due to maltreatment are important, as well as encouraging positive attitudes toward timely reporting (Kumar, 2021).

It is therefore important that teachers are considered as critical actors in child protection, given their daily interaction with the child and the availability of information from which they can observe changes in behavior and functioning; studies show that teachers' knowledge and attitudes towards child abuse are not always adequate and that their professional preparation and experience can have an effect on their attitudes (Anuar et al., 2022; Küçükaydın, 2023). There is not much evidence regarding comparison of knowledge and attitude of child abuse among general and special education teachers. This is an important gap as it is not known whether there are differences in knowledge and attitudes toward child abuse between the different professional experiences of special education teachers. The gap is even more significant in the context of Pakistan, where there is limited empirical evidence on how well teachers are prepared to respond to child protection issues, and the pressing need for enhanced school-based child protection systems that are in place. As a major urban educational hub Lahore provides

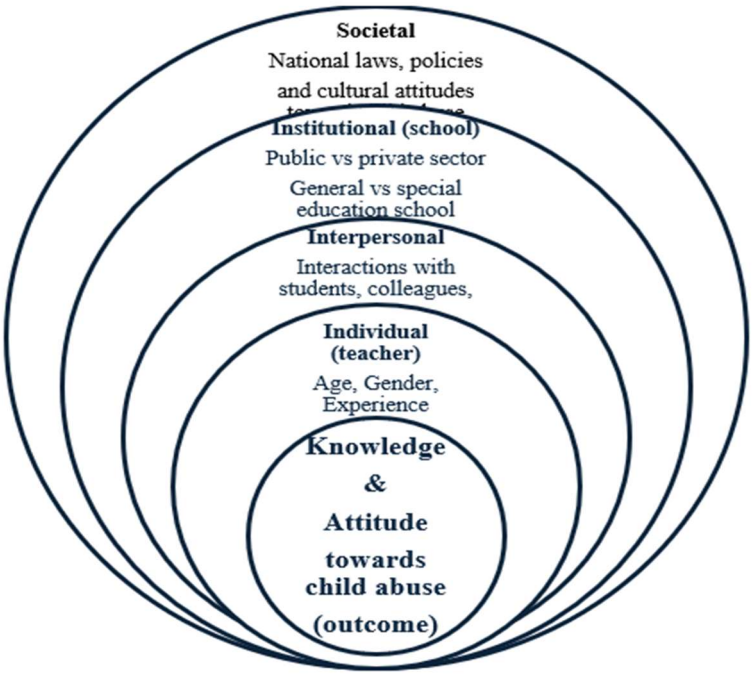
a significant context for this issue. Therefore, the present study aimed to compare the knowledge and attitudes of general and special education teachers regarding child abuse. Moreover, it will also help to provide context-specific evidence which could be taken into consideration for teacher training, child protection policy and more disability responsive child protection practices in educational settings.

Theoretical Framework

The Socioecological Model (SEM) developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2015) is based on the socioecological theory developed by Bronfenbrenner (1994) and takes a holistic approach to understanding child abuse and neglect at the individual, interpersonal, community and societal level (Austin et al., 2020). On the personal level, teachers' personal attributes, perceptions, beliefs, and knowledge matter with regard to child abuse. At the interpersonal level, interactions with students, colleagues and families create a context for knowledge and attitudes about child abuse to emerge and be supported. The school environment, institutional practices and access to child-protection information are important contextual influences at the community/institutional level that impact on teachers' knowledge and attitudes. Legislation, educational policies, cultural norms and social values at the societal level are broader factors that influence the perception of child abuse and child protection. In this way, the SEM offers a theoretical framework for the examination of teachers' knowledge and attitudes as constructs within and/or potentially affected by a number of ecological contexts.

Figure 1

Conceptualizing Socioecological Model to Understand Role of Teachers in Child Protection



Objectives

The current study is carried out to:

- Identify the relationship of teachers' knowledge and their attitude regarding child abuse.
- Investigate the differences in knowledge and attitudes of teachers employed in the general and special education schools toward child abuse.
- Investigate the differences in knowledge and attitudes of teachers employed in the public and private sectors toward child abuse.

Hypotheses

- There will be a significant relationship between knowledge and attitude of teachers regarding child abuse.
- There will be a significant difference regarding teachers' knowledge about child abuse in general and special schools.
- There will be a significant difference regarding teachers'

attitude toward child abuse in general and special schools.

- There will be a significant difference regarding teachers' knowledge about child abuse in public and private schools.
- There will be a significant difference regarding teachers' attitude toward child abuse in public and private schools.

Method

Research Design

The current study is cross-sectional and quantitative in nature and descriptive design was employed to gather data from a sample of teachers across special and general educational settings. Descriptive Quantitative design describes individuals or events and helps us to understand variables without manipulating them (Siedlecki, 2020).

Sample

Cross-sectional survey was carried out to understand the knowledge and attitude of general and special education teachers regarding child abuse. Inclusion criterion was to select teachers with at least two years of work experience in the respective schools. For this purpose, data was gathered from about 250 teachers depending on the availability and willingness through convenience sampling. Obilor (2023) indicates that convenience sampling method helps the researcher to collect data in timely, accessible and economical manner. Initially data was gathered from about 250 teachers, after data screening, incomplete responses were excluded and the final sample for analysis was 218 teachers (response rate=87.2%). Table 1 illustrates the details of the participants.

Table 1

Sample Characteristics (N=218)

Variables	*N(%)*	*M(SD)*
Age		26.61(12.87)
Experience (in years)		5.72(5.97)
Education (in years)		13.34(6.30)
School		1.53(.50)

Special school	103(47.25)	
General school	115(52.75)	
Sector		1.77(.42)
Public school	103(47.25)	
Private school	115(52.75)	
Gender		1.79(.406)
Male	45(20.64)	
Female	173(79.36)	
Prior training on Child Abuse		1.50(.501)
Yes	54(24.77)	
No	164(75.23)	

Instrumentation and Validation

Data was collected by adapting a scale by UNICEF (2020) of knowledge, attitudes and practice survey for professionals. The current study included only knowledge (12-items) and attitude (13-items) domains of the scale followed by translating these domains in Urdu. MAPI guidelines were used for this process, that included forward translation, backward translation, reconciliation and pilot testing. A questionnaire was also developed to gather demographic information about the participants.

Procedure

Data collection was conducted in person at the participating schools. School administrators coordinated with teachers to schedule sessions where teachers were briefed on the study and provided with the Knowledge and Attitudes Survey Questionnaire. During these sessions, teachers completed the questionnaire on-site to ensure data collection remained organized and consistent. Of the 250 questionnaires distributed, 32 were excluded due to incomplete responses identified during the data cleaning phase. On average,

each teacher required 15 to 20 minutes to complete the survey.

Ethical Considerations

The approval for research was received from both the Board of Studies and the Research Proposal Clearance Committee (RPCC). Formal permission letters for data collection were provided to the selected educational institutes. Teachers were provided with an overview of the study's objectives and were assured of the voluntary nature of their participation. They were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage if they chose not to complete the questionnaire. Participants were assured that their responses would be kept anonymous to ensure confidentiality. Moreover, participants received informed consent letters detailing the study's purpose and procedures.

Results

Table 2

Psychometric Properties of the Scales and Subscales (N=218)

Variables	*M*	*SD*	Range	α
Knowledge	37.57	10.76	12-60	.83
Attitude	38.29	8.16	13-65	.71

Table 2 shows the psychometric properties of scales and subscales. The mean scores of knowledge (*M*=37.57, *SD*=10.76) and attitude (*M*=38.29, *SD*=8.16) of the participants indicate moderate level of knowledge and moderately favorable attitudes among the participants based on the range of the respective scales.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation of Study Variable (N=218)

Variable	*N*	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5
1.Knowledge	218	37.57	10.76	-	-	-	-	-
2.Attitude	218	38.29	8.16	.27**	-	-	-	-
3.Age (in years)	218	26.61	12.874	-.07	-.15**	-	-	-

4.Education	218	13.34	6.29	-.08	-.23	.48**	-	-
5.Experience (in years)	218	5.72	5.95	-.06	-.12	.54**	.24**	-

*p<.05, **p<.01.

Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was used to examine the relationships of participants' knowledge and attitudes about child abuse. Moreover, the relationship of knowledge and attitude was also examined with age, education and experience. According to the findings, there is a positive correlation between knowledge and attitudes, indicating that higher levels of knowledge are associated with more positive attitudes. This finding underscores the importance of knowledge in shaping favorable attitudes among participants.

The analysis revealed that there is significant negative correlation between attitudes and age, reflecting that as participants age, attitudes become less favorable towards child abuse. No significant relationship was found between participants' knowledge regarding child abuse and age, education and job experience of the participants. Similarly, no significant relationship was found between attitudes and job experience and education of the participants.

Table 4

Mean Differences of Special School and General School's Teachers in terms of their Knowledge and Attitude regarding Child Abuse (N=218)

Variable	Special Schools		General Schools		*t*	*p*	*Cohen's d*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*			
Knowledge	44.41	14.43	48.10	8.94	-2.21	.02	.30
Attitude	31.66	10.12	33.92	6.38	-1.94	.05	.26

The independent samples t-test was used to find differences in knowledge and attitude of teachers from special and general schools regarding child abuse. According to the findings there was a significant mean difference between general school and special schoolteachers' knowledge regarding child abuse. The results showed that teachers from general schools (M=48.10) have higher knowledge regarding child abuse than special schoolteachers

(*M*=44.41). There was no significant difference between general and special schoolteachers' attitudes regarding child abuse.

Table 5

Mean Difference of Male and Female Participants about their Knowledge and Attitude toward Child Abuse (N=218)

Variable	Male		Female		*t*	*p*	*Cohen's d*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*			
Knowledge	40.22	15.19	48.01	10.40	-3.32	.002	.59
Attitude	29.95	12.79	33.60	6.69	-1.85	.07	.35

The independent samples *t*-test was used to find mean differences regarding the gender of participants and subscales i.e. knowledge and attitudes. According to the findings there was a significant mean difference between male and female teacher's knowledge regarding child abuse. The results showed that female teachers (*M*= 48.01) reported higher knowledge of child abuse than male teachers (*M*=40.22). No significant difference was found between male and female teachers' attitudes regarding child abuse.

Table 6

Mean Differences of Participants in Public and Private Schools Regarding their Knowledge and Attitude towards Child Abuse (N=218)

Variable	Private Sectors		Public Sectors		*t*	*p*	*Cohen's d*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*			
Knowledge	47.66	10.88	42.12	14.29	-2.92	.004	.43
Attitude	33.69	7.40	30.02	10.80	-2.254	.028	.39

The independent sample t-test was used to find mean differences regarding school sectors of participants and subscales i.e. knowledge and attitudes. According to the findings, there was a significant mean difference between public and private sector teachers' knowledge regarding child abuse. The results showed that teachers from private sectors (*M*=47.66) have higher knowledge regarding child abuse than public sectors (*M*=42.12).

Similarly, there was a significant mean difference between public and private sector teachers' attitudes regarding child abuse. The results showed that teachers of private sectors (*M*=33.69) have more favorable attitudes regarding child abuse than public sectors (*M*=30.02).

Discussion

Child abuse remains one of the most devastating social issues, with long-lasting effects on individuals and communities. Its consequences span across physical, emotional, and psychological domains, often impairing a child's ability to lead a fulfilling and healthy life. Globally, the prevalence of child abuse is alarmingly high, affecting children in both developed and developing countries (Drake & Jonson-Reid, 2024). The objectives of the study were to identify the relationship of teachers' knowledge and their attitude regarding child abuse, to investigate the differences in knowledge and attitudes of teachers employed in the general and special education schools toward child abuse and to investigate the differences in knowledge and attitudes of teachers employed in the public and private sectors toward child abuse.

This study hypothesized that there will be significant relationship between knowledge and attitude of teachers regarding child abuse. Results of the current study show positive relationship between educator's knowledge and attitude; based on these findings, hypothesis of the current study is accepted. AlFaraj et al. (2024) also reported significant positive relationship between knowledge and attitude of physicians towards child abuse.

The current research also highlighted that female teachers showed higher knowledge than male teachers concerning child abuse. This is contrasting with other research done in other countries indicating that gender has no effect on the ability of educators in the case of child protection (Muniz & Powers, 2022). Another report supports this through stating that in most institutions, gender does not play a role in protecting children from harm (WHO, 2021). Similarly, Forsner et al. (2021) concluded that being a Canadian, male and female teachers all had equal knowledge and attitude regarding child abuse. However, some studies based on the Pakistan revealed that male teachers are less actively participating in the

identification and reporting of child abuse due to cultural and organizational norms, trends also found in other South Asian countries such as India (Zafar, 2021).

Findings of the current study show negative relationship between educator's age and their attitude; reflecting higher the age of the participants, lower the favorable attitudes. This finding is consistent with a study by Goldman et al. (2020) which depicted that older teacher's attitudes are influenced by their pre-established beliefs about punishment and child discipline which lead to less favorable attitudes towards reporting child abuse. Teachers who were older may have very conservative attitudes to child protection and this hampers their interaction with policies in child abuse reportage. The same was found by De-Haan et al. (2019) in Netherlands where the older teachers were least likely to embrace current approaches toward child abuse reporting. Going further, Lim et al. (2021) also reported the role of training in this regard, indicating that teachers who have been training on child protection most recently tend to demonstrate more favorable attitudes and practices. Research from developed countries affirms the effect of accessibility of quality and durable resources to increase the teacher's capacity for intervention (Brown et al., 2021).

This study hypothesized that there will be significant differences in the knowledge and attitude of teachers in special and general education settings regarding child abuse. Results indicate that general education teachers showed greater knowledge than special educations teachers regarding child abuse while no significant difference was found in their attitudes. Tenorio (2024) also reported similar findings indicating lack of awareness in special education teachers regarding child abuse.

This study hypothesized that there will be significant relationship between educators' knowledge and attitude about child abuse in public and private schools. Current findings indicate significant differences in knowledge and attitudes of teachers in public and private sector, reflecting that teachers in private sector have higher knowledge and more favorable attitudes than public sector teachers regarding child abuse. These findings are consistent with Shah et al. (2020); Induja (2021), highlighting the need for institutional support in child protection. Similarly, in Pakistan, while

comparing the situations in public and private schools, it was highlighted that the lack of funding in public school hampers efforts at child protection and that teachers in public schools are usually unable undergo sufficient training for the purpose (Pakistan Education Taskforce, 2020). These findings reinforce the need to provide institutional support in terms of training programs, child protection policies and related resources to prevent child abuse.

Conclusion

This study aimed to assess the knowledge and attitude of general and special education teachers regarding child abuse. The results indicated a positive association between teachers' knowledge and their attitudes towards child abuse, with female teachers demonstrating higher levels of knowledge than their male counterparts. General education teachers reflected higher levels of knowledge regarding child abuse than teachers working in special education schools, highlighting a need to strengthen child protection awareness policies in special education schools. Differences were also found between public and private sector educators, with private school teachers exhibiting greater knowledge and more favorable attitudes, likely due to better institutional support. These results emphasize the need for enhanced training, increased resources, and supportive frameworks to better equip educators in identifying, reporting, and preventing child abuse in both special and general education settings.

Limitations

- The participant pool for this study was small, and sampling was done through a non-probability method. Future research should include a larger participant pool and probability sampling method to ensure generalization.
- This research exclusively included teachers of schools. Future research should broaden the participant pool to include other caregivers, parents, health professionals and doctors.

Implications

The findings of the current study highlight a strong need to equip teachers regarding child abuse, as teachers are the first point

of contact with children in schools, it is pertinent that teachers have awareness and knowledge on child abuse that ultimately shape supportive attitudes. The need for creating awareness becomes even more intensive in special education schools. The availability and quality of manuals or guidelines to identify the most common signs of child abuse should be present in professional practices. Overall, the study seeks to inform policy and educational reforms that promote safer environments for all children, particularly those who are more vulnerable due to disabilities or societal stigma.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data associated with this study will be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

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