



Exploring Teachers' Role in Promoting Students' Mental Health and Emotional Well Being in Secondary Schools of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

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Abstract

This study explores the role of teachers in promoting students' mental health and emotional well-being in secondary schools of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 teachers (10 males and 10 female). Thematic analysis revealed ten key themes: awareness of students' mental health needs, emotional support, classroom strategies, teacher-student relationships, challenges in addressing mental health, school environment, awareness of emotional well-being, teacher training, parental and community engagement and personal reflection. Findings indicate that teachers play a central role in fostering students' resilience, self-confidence, and emotional regulation, though their efforts are constrained by limited training, resources, large class sizes, and societal stigma. Female teachers highlighted additional gender-sensitive and cultural considerations, particularly for female students. The study recommends structured professional development, supportive school policies, parental involvement, interactive classroom strategies, and reflective teacher practices to enhance students' mental health and emotional well-being. These insights provide guidance for policymakers, educators and school administrators in creating inclusive and supportive learning environments.

Keywords: Teachers' Role, Mental Health, Emotional Well-Being

Introduction

Teachers have traditionally been seen primarily as instructors of academic content. However, developed educational systems increasingly recognize that students' mental health and emotional well-being are central to their academic success, social functioning, and long term development (Kirran et al., 2025). Schools are not isolated environments; they represent social systems where students spend significant hours daily, interact closely with teachers and peers, and develop cognitive and emotional capacities that shape behavior and future life outcomes. In this context, teachers are no longer limited to instructional roles but are key players in identifying, supporting, and nurturing students' psychological well-being. A growing body of research highlights that teacher student relationships, teacher empathy, and emotional support practices can significantly

influence students' mental health outcomes, including anxiety, depression, engagement, and resilience (Karim, S. 2024). Research studies found that higher levels of teacher empathy were directly associated with lower student stress and higher engagement, suggesting a protective effect of empathetic educational practices. In many educational settings, mental health challenges among students such as stress, emotional strain, and behavioral difficulties have become pervasive. Contemporary classroom environments show that emotional strain can outpace academic concerns, making emotional support an essential component of teacher responsibilities. Teachers frequently report encountering expressions of anxiety, fear, and fatigue, indicating a shift in the nature of students' needs within the educational context. Despite this, teachers often lack the necessary resources, training, and systemic support to respond effectively to these evolving demands. This makes it crucial to understand how teachers perceive their roles, what practices they use, and what challenges they face in supporting students' mental health and emotional well-being. The context of Pakistan, including regions such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), presents additional socio cultural and institutional challenges that impact both teacher practices and student well-being. Research within Pakistani educational settings indicates that teacher student relationships significantly influence student psychological well-being, and a supportive school environment is associated with improved emotional resilience among students. Targeted studies on teacher roles in promoting mental health in Pakistan remain limited, calling for qualitative insights into teachers' lived experiences. There is also emerging evidence from within Pakistan that teachers' emotional support is critical for inclusive education and psychological support emphasizing the importance of localized research that explores context specific practices and barriers. Given these global and regional trends, the present study aims to explore secondary school teachers' roles in promoting students' mental health and emotional well-being in KP, Pakistan. Focusing on teachers in public secondary schools in districts such as Mardan and Malakand, this research seeks to understand teachers' perceptions, strategies, and challenges. By doing so, the study hopes to contribute theoretical and practical insights that inform teacher education, school policy, and school based mental health support frameworks in the region (Younas, M., El-Dakhs, D. A. S., & Jiang, Y. 2025).

Literature Review

The role of teachers in student mental health and emotional well-being has gained increasing attention in educational research, as educators are recognized not only as pedagogues but also as frontline responders to students' psychological needs. Research studies exploring teachers' views on mental health programmes reported that teachers often encounter significant barriers including insufficient training, limited curriculum time, and inadequate institutional support when trying to implement well-being interventions in schools. This highlights the global concern that while teachers may be willing participants in mental health support, they are often underprepared and under resourced. A considerable body of research has demonstrated the importance of teacher student relationships in fostering emotional stability and psychological well-being (Kirran et al. 2025). Research shows that students directly associated positive school environments and constructive teacher interactions with improved psychological health outcomes, highlighting that healthy interpersonal relationships within schools are foundational to well-being. The emotional dimensions of teaching not merely transform academic delivery but vital for student engagement and mental health. Specific research focusing on emotional support reveals that teachers' affective support can reduce students' emotional exhaustion and improve motivational profiles, mediated by factors such as self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation (Tunio et al., 2023). This study conducted within Pakistan's education context reinforces that teacher support affects not only psychological outcomes but also motivational and academic dimensions,

indicating complex interrelationships among teacher practices, motivation, and emotional well-being. Furthermore, integrating mental health education into school curricula underline that such programmes can significantly enhance emotional regulation, reduce anxiety and stress, and foster better peer relations, contributing to improved academic engagement and classroom climate. A survey of educators found that a significant majority feel responsible for students' psychological needs, yet lack sufficient resources to provide effective support. This disconnects between teacher responsibility and available support mechanisms are a recurrent theme in educational literature. In the context of Pakistan, inclusive education initiatives have underscored the importance of addressing psychological needs within schools, suggesting policy frameworks should integrate teacher training to improve mental health support, advocate for school based approaches that empower teachers with both knowledge and practical skills (Imran, N., Rahman, A., Chaudhry, N., & Asif, A. 2018).

Research Questions

1. How do secondary school teachers perceive their role in promoting students' mental health and emotional well-being in schools of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?
2. What strategies and classroom practices do teachers use to support students' mental health and emotional well-being in secondary schools?
3. What challenges and support needs do teachers face in addressing students' mental health and emotional well-being in the school context?

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Theory (CASEL, 2025), which provides a contemporary and evidence-based framework to understand the relationship between teachers' roles and students' mental health and emotional well-being. SEL posits that students' social and emotional competencies including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making are critical for their overall psychological health, academic engagement, and adaptive functioning. Teachers serve as central facilitators in this process, modeling emotional regulation, fostering supportive classroom relationships, and implementing strategies that help students recognize, express, and manage their emotions effectively. Through empathetic interactions, encouragement, and guidance, teachers can create safe and nurturing classroom environments that reduce student anxiety, enhance resilience, and promote positive mental health outcomes. Furthermore, SEL emphasizes that teachers own social-emotional competence and well-being directly influence their ability to support students, highlighting the dynamic and reciprocal nature of teacher-student interactions. In the context of Pakistani secondary schools, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where students face socio-cultural and institutional challenges, integrating SEL underscores the importance of contextualized teacher practices that address both emotional and psychological needs. By adopting SEL as the theoretical lens, this study not only examines how teachers perceive and enact their roles in promoting mental health but also identifies the strategies and barriers that affect their effectiveness, providing a holistic understanding of the mechanisms through which teacher practices influence students' emotional well-being and overall mental health.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to explore the role of teachers in promoting students' mental health and emotional well-being in secondary schools of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The study population comprised of secondary school

teachers from public schools in District Mardan and Malakand, with a purposive sample of 10 teachers from 10 public schools in Mardan (mixed gender) and 10 female teachers from selected schools in Malakand, selected based on their experience and willingness to participate in data collection through semi-structured interviews, focusing on teachers' perceptions, strategies, and challenges in supporting students' mental health. Thematic analysis (Braun, V., & Clarke, V. 2014) employed to identify key themes and patterns.

Findings: Male Teachers' Experiences and Perceptions

Theme 1: Awareness of Students' Mental Health Needs

Male teachers recognized that students often face stress, anxiety, and peer pressure, which affect both academic performance and emotional stability. They acknowledged that noticing early signs of distress, such as withdrawal, irritability, or declining grades, is essential. Teachers emphasized that being aware of these challenges allows them to provide timely guidance.

Experiences and Perceptions: Teachers reported observing changes in students' behavior during exam periods or when they face family challenges. They often act as the first point of support before referring students to counselors or senior staff.

"I notice that some students become quiet or lose interest in class. I try to talk to them to understand what is bothering them."

Theme 2: Emotional Support as a Core Teacher Role

Teachers consistently identified providing emotional support as a key part of their responsibility. They see themselves as mentors and role models, offering empathy, encouragement, and reassurance to students who are emotionally vulnerable.

Experiences and Perceptions: Teachers often spend extra time listening to students' problems, boosting their morale, and reassuring them during stressful times. They highlighted that such support can prevent emotional issues from escalating.

"Sometimes students come to me sharing their personal problems. I try to listen carefully and guide them without judgment."

Theme 3: Classroom Strategies for Promoting Well-Being

Teachers described using interactive classroom strategies to enhance emotional well-being, such as group discussions, cooperative learning, and stress-relieving activities. These strategies promote peer interaction, reduce anxiety, and improve engagement.

Experiences and Perceptions: Many teachers encouraged team-based projects and allowed students to express themselves freely, helping them develop resilience and confidence.

"I organize small group activities where students can discuss their issues or collaborate on tasks. It makes them feel more confident and relaxed."

Theme 4: Teacher-Student Relationship

Building trust and strong interpersonal relationships was seen as essential. Teachers believed that empathy, understanding, and consistent support enhance students' willingness to share problems and improve emotional regulation.

Experiences and Perceptions: Teachers often spend time outside regular class hours guiding students and building rapport. They stressed that positive relationships are the foundation for effective emotional support.

"If students trust you, they open up. Without trust, they hide their problems and we cannot help them."

Theme 5: Challenges in Addressing Mental Health

Teachers reported facing significant challenges in promoting students' mental health, including lack of formal training, large class sizes, cultural stigma, and limited resources. Some students are hesitant to discuss their issues due to societal norms.

Experiences and Perceptions: Teachers expressed frustration at not having structured support or clear protocols to handle emotional problems effectively.

"We want to help, but there is no proper training or guidance. Sometimes, students do not even want to talk because of stigma."

Theme 6: Role of School Environment

Teachers highlighted the impact of school leadership, policies, and collaborative culture on their ability to support students. A supportive environment encourages proactive interventions, while a rigid or resource-poor environment limits effectiveness.

Experiences and Perceptions: Teachers who felt supported by principals and colleagues were more confident in addressing students' emotional issues.

"When the principal and other teachers cooperate, it is easier to help students. Otherwise, we feel limited in what we can do."

Theme 7: Awareness of Emotional Well-Being

Teachers understood that emotional well-being is broader than academics and includes resilience, self-confidence, and coping skills. They emphasized teaching students how to manage emotions alongside academic content.

Experiences and Perceptions: Teachers integrated emotional check-ins, reflective exercises, and stress management strategies into daily interactions.

"We need to teach students how to cope with stress and build confidence. Mental health is not just absence of illness."

Theme 8: Teacher Training and Professional Development Needs

All teachers expressed a strong need for professional development related to mental health. Workshops, seminars, and hands-on counseling training were suggested to enhance their ability to respond effectively to students' emotional needs.

Experiences and Perceptions: Teachers felt that current training is mostly academic, leaving them unprepared to manage emotional or psychological issues.

"We need training focused on students' mental health and emotional support. Without it, we cannot provide proper guidance."

Theme 9: Collaboration with Parents and Community

Teachers highlighted that parental engagement and community support are critical. When parents are aware and involved, interventions at school become more effective, and students feel more supported.

Experiences and Perceptions: Teachers reported organizing meetings with parents to discuss emotional and behavioral issues, emphasizing consistent guidance at home and school.

"When parents cooperate, it becomes easier for us to guide students. Their support reinforces what we teach at school."

Theme 10: Personal Experience and Teacher Reflection

Teachers acknowledged that their own experiences and emotional intelligence shape how they interact with students. Reflective practice allows teachers to improve strategies, adapt to students' needs, and build empathy.

Experiences and Perceptions: Many teachers drew on personal school experiences or challenges they faced as youth to better understand and relate to their students.

"I think about my own experiences as a student, which helps me understand what my students are going through and how to guide them."

Findings: Female Teachers' Experiences and Perceptions

Theme 1: Awareness of Students' Mental Health Needs

Female teachers were highly conscious of students' mental health challenges, particularly stress, fear of failure, peer pressure, and family expectations. They emphasized the importance of early identification of emotional or behavioral changes to prevent escalation.

Experiences and Perceptions: Female teachers noticed that students, especially girls, often hesitate to share problems with male teachers, making their role crucial in providing accessible support.

"Many students come to me quietly because they feel safe. Recognizing early signs of stress is very important."

Theme 2: Emotional Support as a Core Teacher Role

Female teachers viewed emotional support as a central responsibility, emphasizing empathy, encouragement, and active listening. They reported fostering an environment where students feel heard and valued, which positively affects emotional well-being.

"I try to make students feel comfortable sharing their worries. Sometimes just listening helps them a lot."

Theme 3: Classroom Strategies for Promoting Well-Being

Teachers employed interactive strategies, such as discussion circles, reflective writing, and collaborative learning, to help students manage stress and express emotions constructively.

Experiences and Perceptions: These activities encouraged peer support and resilience, helping students feel less isolated in their struggles.

"I use group activities and discussion sessions to let students share their thoughts and feel supported by peers."

Theme 4: Teacher-Student Relationship

Female teachers emphasized building trust, patience, and understanding, noting that these relationships are essential for effective emotional guidance. They highlighted that positive teacher-student interactions encourage students to open up about challenges.

"Students trust female teachers for emotional guidance. This trust is the key to helping them overcome anxiety or fear."

Theme 5: Challenges in Addressing Mental Health

Teachers reported cultural norms, lack of formal mental health training, limited counseling resources, and large class sizes as major barriers. Some students fear being judged by peers or parents if they seek help.

"We face challenges because mental health is often seen as a taboo, and students hesitate to discuss their problems openly."

Theme 6: Role of School Environment

Female teachers highlighted that supportive leadership, safe school policies, and collaborative teacher culture positively influence their ability to support students' emotional well-being.

"When the principal and colleagues are supportive, it becomes easier to guide students emotionally."

Theme 7: Awareness of Emotional Well-Being

Teachers stressed the importance of fostering resilience, self-confidence, and emotional regulation. They viewed emotional well-being as equally important as academic success.

"We teach students how to cope with stress and maintain emotional balance. Confidence and resilience are essential for their growth."

Theme 8: Teacher Training and Professional Development Needs

Female teachers emphasized the need for specialized training in mental health, counseling skills, and stress management techniques. They noted that current professional development focuses mostly on pedagogy and curriculum delivery.

"We need workshops and training to better understand and respond to students' emotional and mental health needs."

Theme 9: Collaboration with Parents and Community

Teachers described working closely with parents to address students' emotional and mental health challenges. They highlighted that parental support enhances the effectiveness of interventions, particularly for adolescent girls.

"Parent involvement is critical. When they support their children emotionally, it strengthens what we do in school."

Theme 10: Personal Experience and Teacher Reflection

Female teachers emphasized reflection on their own experiences and emotional competence as key to effective student support. They adjust their strategies based on what works best for individual students.

"I often reflect on my own school experiences, which helps me understand students' struggles and guide them better."

Summary of Male Teachers

Male teachers recognized their critical role in supporting students' mental health and emotional well-being. They observed that students often experience stress, anxiety, peer pressure, and family-related challenges, which can affect academic performance and emotional stability. Male teachers emphasized emotional support, including empathy, encouragement, and active listening, as a core part of their responsibilities. They used classroom strategies such as group discussions, cooperative learning, and stress-relieving activities to foster resilience, engagement, and confidence. Building trusting teacher-student relationships was seen as essential for effective guidance.

Challenges reported by male teachers included lack of formal training, limited resources, large class sizes, and social stigma. They highlighted the importance of a supportive school environment, collaboration with colleagues, and parental engagement. Male teachers also noted the value of personal reflection and emotional intelligence in adapting strategies to students' needs.

Summary of Female Teachers

Female teachers acknowledged the importance of their role in promoting students' mental health and emotional well-being. They observed that students, particularly girls, face stress, anxiety, academic pressure, and cultural constraints. Female teachers emphasized gender-sensitive awareness to effectively address these challenges. Emotional support was central to female teachers' approach, including active listening, empathy, and encouragement. Classroom strategies included discussion circles, reflective writing, collaborative learning, and peer-support activities, with a particular focus on helping girl's express emotions and build resilience. Trusting relationships with students were highlighted as crucial for emotional guidance.

Female teachers also reported challenges such as lack of training, limited resources, cultural taboos, and societal stigma, noting additional barriers for female students seeking help. They emphasized the need for gender-sensitive professional development, supportive school environments, and parental and community collaboration. Reflective practice and drawing on personal experiences were important tools for adapting strategies to student needs.

Comparative Discussion of Male and Female Teachers' Findings

The findings reveal that both male and female teachers in secondary schools of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa perceive their role as central to promoting students' mental health and emotional well-being. Teachers from both regions observed that students face stress, anxiety, peer pressure, and family-related challenges, which can negatively affect academic performance and emotional stability. Both groups emphasized the importance of emotional support, classroom strategies, and building trusting teacher-student relationships as foundational to addressing these challenges.

Similarities:

Both male and female teachers highlighted the importance of empathy, encouragement, and attentive listening as part of their emotional support.

Both groups implemented interactive classroom strategies to promote resilience, self-confidence, and engagement among students.

Challenges reported by both included lack of formal training, limited resources, large class sizes, and societal stigma.

Both emphasized the importance of a supportive school environment, collaboration with colleagues, and parental engagement.

Teachers in both groups recognized the value of personal reflection and emotional intelligence in adapting their strategies to meet students' needs.

Differences:

Female teachers emphasized gender-sensitive awareness, recognizing that female students may face additional cultural or societal constraints that affect their willingness to share emotional concerns. Female teachers employed reflective writing and discussion circles more frequently as strategies to help girls articulate emotions and build coping skills.

Professional development needs highlighted by female teachers included gender-sensitive and culturally contextualized training, whereas male teachers emphasized general mental health and counseling skills. Female teachers particularly stressed the importance of creating safe and inclusive spaces for female students and engaging parents actively in supporting emotional well-being.

Conclusion

This study explored the role of teachers in promoting students' mental health and emotional well-being in secondary schools of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, focusing on male teachers in Mardan and female teachers in Malakand. The findings indicate that teachers play a central role in supporting students' emotional and psychological development through empathy, emotional support, interactive classroom strategies, and building trusting relationships. While both male and female teachers share similar approaches, female teachers emphasized gender-sensitive and culturally contextualized strategies, particularly for female students. Challenges such as lack of training, limited resources, large class sizes, and societal stigma constrain the effectiveness of teacher interventions. Personal reflection, emotional intelligence, supportive school environments, and collaboration with parents and the community were identified as key enablers for promoting students' well-being. Based on these findings, enhancing teachers' capacity through professional development, supportive policies, parental engagement, interactive classroom practices, and reflective peer support is essential. Implementing these measures can strengthen students' mental health and emotional well-being, foster resilience, and create an inclusive and supportive learning environment in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Recommendations

Teacher Training and Professional Development:

Need to implement structured professional development programs focusing on mental health, emotional support, and counseling skills, including gender-sensitive and culturally contextualized approaches.

2. Supportive School Environment:

It's recommended to develop school policies and practices that foster inclusive, safe, and supportive environments, enabling teachers to effectively promote students' mental health and emotional well-being.

3. Parental and Community Engagement:

Actively involve parents and the community in supporting students' mental health through awareness programs and collaborative initiatives, particularly addressing cultural and gender-specific barriers.

4. Interactive and Reflective Classroom Strategies:

Encourage teachers to use participatory, reflective, and expressive teaching strategies that build students' resilience, coping skills, and emotional regulation.

5. Teacher Reflection and Peer Support Networks:

Promote self-reflection and peer collaboration among teachers to enhance their emotional intelligence, share effective strategies, and continuously improve student support practices.

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