

## QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF INTERPLAY OF SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT AND PERSONALITY ON STIGMATIZED TEACHERS DEALING WITH ADHD CHILDREN

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### Abstract

*To investigate the effects of social environment and personality on the stigmatized teacher of children with ADHD in Pakistan, a qualitative study was designed. Triangular methodology and purposive sampling were applied. In this research, eight teachers who work with ADHD children aged 7–12 years were interviewed. Data was analyzed through thematic analysis, using NVivo 14, for each of the challenges that faced by the teachers, highlighting the need for social and personal situations. The research revealed that the professional development of teachers working with ADHD children in Pakistan is impeded by several factors, which were majorly influenced by social environment and personal experience. Widespread negative labeling, stereotyping, and discrimination from society in general resulted in public and self-stigma, which hindered their professional growth and motivation. Teachers expressed frustration, sadness and isolation that were worsened by a lack of understanding from society and peers. These challenges created inferiority complex, withdrawal and negative thought patterns that adversely impacted their self-esteem and professional development. Fostering awareness and providing resources to address the repercussions of this emotional and professional toll can improve the well-being of those educators, allowing for greater support of students with ADHD.*

**Keywords:** Stigmatization, Thematic analysis, Triangulation method, Social Environment, Personality

### Introduction

As stated in Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-5-TR, hyperactivity/impulsivity or inattention symptoms must occur frequently, persist for at least six months and manifest before age 12 (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, ADHD is the prevailing disorder observed among children of school age (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). ADHD is considered as a developmental condition categorized by reduced ability to maintain focus and heightened levels of impulsivity in children and adolescents (Sadock, 2009). According to Goffman (1963), stigma refers to a mark of disgrace with respect to a particular circumstance, quality or person, which oftentimes leads victims to experience embarrassment in front of others. Society's negative attitudes can create public stigma that results in self-stigma and affiliate stigma, thus affecting their self-esteem and the perceptions of others close to them. The progression from public stigma to self-stigma, which subsequently results in affiliate stigma, exemplifies the significant impact of societal attitudes on individual identities and interpersonal relationships (Corrigan & Rao, 2012).

### Review of Literature

Research has supported that in educational settings, the level of stigma experienced by students can be significantly influenced by teachers' knowledge of and attitudes toward various disorders. For instance, it has been revealed that the greater the knowledge about and experience with ASD, the less the stigma among teachers (Low et al., 2021). For example, brief educational interventions have been able to improve the knowledge of teachers while reducing stigma associated with

stigmatizing attitudes against students with obsessive-compulsive disorder (Chaves et al., 2021). Quantitative research by Cautillo (2018) has identified mental health literacy programs that successfully diminished stigma among preservice teachers and further built their capacity for providing support to students dealing with mental health challenges.

The stigma surrounding mental and developmental disorders is high in the collectivist societies like Pakistan. Children with special needs are regularly referred to with derogatory terms like "mental" and "crazy," which equally hurts their parents and teachers as well (Moses, 2010). This will negatively affect developing a healthy relationship and getting appropriate response towards the special student's needs. Teachers' attitudes and behaviors play a significant role in shaping students' experiences and self-perceptions, hence influencing their general well-being (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014).

### Materials and Methods

A purposive sampling technique was used. A total of 8 teachers, who deal with 7 to 12 years of children with ADHD from private and government special education sectors of Pakistan, from 5 February 2024 to 23 May 2024. Teachers of other disabilities (ASD, ID, Down syndrome) were excluded from the study. Qualitative research design by using triangulation method was used to explore the stigmatization experienced by teachers of ADHD children (Carter et al., 2014). Thematic analysis using NVIVO 14 as well as Braun and Clarke (2006) six steps were employed for examining qualitative data. Furthermore, approval for the study was obtained from the Institute Research Board and the teaching institutions were contacted for permission. Moreover, confidentiality, anonymity and privacy of the information were ensured.

### Results

The analysis identified two main themes, which encompassed various subthemes highlighting different dimensions of stigmatization. Theme 1: Influence of social environment is shown in Figure 1, and theme 2: Influence of personality is shown in Figure 2.

#### Theme 1: Influence of social environment

**Negative Labeling:** These depict the different ways of negative labeling faced by the teachers of ADHD children in Pakistan. The teachers reported the use of negative labeling when working with ADHD children that undermined their professional competence, self-esteem and motivation.

*"People labeled me crazy for dealing with ADHD. It was hurtful to know because I am passionate to work with them, yet the negative labels put doubt about myself." P1*

The misinterpretation of ADHD being an excuse for bad behavior, further being marginalized at the workplace, enhances the difficulty and the negative labeling faced by teachers and ADHD students.

*"There's this prevailing belief that ADHD is just an excuse for bad behavior. My colleagues sometimes teased me that I must have a high tolerance for chaos to work with these kids. It's demoralizing when your commitment is reduced to a punchline." P4*

**Stereotyping:** Usually, in Pakistan, a teacher experienced societal stigma and stereotyping pressures, particularly while dealing with ADHD children and pointed out that being a female teacher in the ADHD education sector is challenging.

*"Well, it is not always easy. There is a stigma attached to teaching children with ADHD and people tend to stereotype us. Some believe that because we work with these kids, our children will have similar behavioral issues." P6*

**Discrimination:** These explanations give an insight into the various sides of discrimination: public stigma and self-stigma, which is encountered by teachers of ADHD children in Pakistan. The

participant encountered public stigma for recommending a peer support program that other parents adopted as an approach for children as a distortion.

*"When I suggested a peer support program to help students with ADHD, some in the community resisted; parents claimed it 'spoiled' their children. It is sad to see such public stigma against an initiative aimed at inclusion and support." P3*

Participant reported self-stigma within the teaching community, where colleagues resist the idea of providing extra resources for ADHD students.

*"I find myself facing stigma when trying to advocate for additional resources in the classroom to help students with ADHD. Colleagues will make comments like, 'Why are things complicated? These children should just adapt. It is also not easy in the teaching community when there is resistance among students to meet different needs.'" P1*

**Lack of understanding:** These verbatim statements underscore the complexities and nuances of the challenges surrounding ADHD awareness and understanding in Pakistan. Participant reported the myth is that screen time and outdoor activities cause ADHD parents to ridicule it as a real biological condition.

*"Many parents think that ADHD is a result of too much screen time or not enough outdoor activities. I tried explaining to them that there is a biological background for ADHD, and some would discard that and say the struggles are merely due to lifestyle choices." P2*

The self-stigma within the teaching community, when some colleagues would say that she should just try harder. Misconceptions promote stigma and create barriers that need to be addressed in the classroom.

*"Some colleagues wonder why there is a need for more resources in the classroom and why these ADHD students cannot just try harder. The lack of understanding about ADHD results in internalized stigma among teachers; thus, the advocacy for more support becomes problematic." P8*

**Figure. 1** Thematic map of Theme 1: Influence of social environment, by using NVivo 14



**Theme 2: Influence of personality**

**Emotions and Feelings:** These verbatim statements and explanations bring out the range of emotions that teachers experience with stigma associated with their work with ADHD children in Pakistan. Participant reported sadness due to public stigma, especially when the teachers try to make a difference in the lives of ADHD children.

*"Public stigma can lead to feelings of sadness as we try to do well for ADHD children, but the lack of acceptance from peers and society leads to frustration". P8*

Furthermore, Public stigma increased feelings of isolation and frustration as trying to teach others about ADHD was met with continuous resistance. This is emotionally burdensome, hence affecting both ADHD children and teachers.

*"Public stigma creates a sense of isolation that exacerbates emotional challenges. Frustration grows as we work hard to educate others about ADHD but still encounter resistance." P5*

**Negative Thoughts:** These verbatim depict how stigma influences the ideation of the teachers working with ADHD children in Pakistan. Participant shares how public stigma manifests in the form of negative self-talk. There are moments of questioning suitability for the role and doubting capabilities.

*"Public stigma translates into negative self-talk. There are moments when I doubt my abilities and question my suitability for the role. The stigma seeps into my thoughts, creating a cycle of self-doubt that requires constant effort to break." P7*

**Professional Growth:** These verbatims reflect how stigma directly affects the professional growth of teachers working with ADHD children in Pakistan. The participant emphasizes how colleagues underestimate the value of working with ADHD children, which can make the challenges of gaining respect for the work overwhelming.

*"Public stigma directly affects professional development. Professional colleagues often dismiss the importance of our work with ADHD children and it is difficult to take it seriously." P1*

Another participant reported a more concrete result of public stigma, hindering career opportunities. People often diminish the importance of working with ADHD children, resulting in less promotion and recognition of their efforts.

*"Public stigma concretely impacts career opportunities and plays down the importance of our work with ADHD children. The implications of such playing down include fewer opportunities for advancement and recognition, which work against our professional growth." P3*

**Withdrawal:** The verbatims elaborate how defamation has hurt the teacher's feelings. The participant describes how stigma led to reluctance to openly share experiences. Fear of judgment, especially when those individuals would not understand working with ADHD children, increased my feelings of withdrawal.

*"Stigma has made me withdraw from sharing openly. There is a fear of judgment, especially when others do not understand challenges that occur when working with ADHD children. This consequently burdens my emotional well-being and prevents possible collaboration with colleagues." P4*

**Inferiority Complex:** These verbatim amplify the deep impact of stigma on the development of an inferiority complex in teachers working with ADHD children in Pakistan. Societal judgments and constant comparisons to colleagues handling different special needs contribute to feelings of

inadequacy and erode confidence in their abilities as educators. Participant describes how the stigma associated with ADHD has brought about an inferiority complex.

*"The stigma associated with ADHD has nurtured an inferiority complex in me. Compared with colleagues working with other special needs children, one cannot be confident of competency. P7*

Furthermore, Participant explains how public stigma creates an inferiority complex, contributing to their view of teaching ADHD children. Society's judgment creates self-doubt about their ability compared to other special needs peers.

*"Public stigma fosters low self-esteem, which affects my approach to teaching ADHD children. The disdain created by society usually creates self-doubt, whenever their efforts are compared to those of other special needs professionals. There is always a battle to correct the nature of our work through misunderstandings among the public." P2*

**Negative Thoughts:** These verbatim depict how stigma influences the ideation of the teachers working with ADHD children in Pakistan. Participant shares how public stigma manifests in the form of negative self-talk. There are moments of questioning suitability for the role and doubting capabilities.

*"Public stigma translates into negative self-talk. There are moments when I doubt my abilities and question my suitability for the role. The stigma seeps into my thoughts, creating a cycle of self-doubt that requires constant effort to break." P7*

**Self-Esteem:** These verbatim point to the negative impact of stigma on the self-esteem of teachers working with ADHD children in Pakistan. Participant reported that constant labeling and judgment deplete confidence and make it hard to maintain a positive self-image.

*"Stigma impacts my self-esteem. By being constantly labeled and judged while working with ADHD children, one loses all confidence. It is very difficult to maintain a positive self-identity. Where no one recognizes the value of your efforts." P8*

**Figure. 2** Thematic map of Theme 2: Influence of personality, by using NVivo 14



### Discussion

This study investigates the impact of social stigma on teachers working with ADHD children in Pakistan. The findings reveal that negative labeling, discrimination and lack of awareness about ADHD have a great influence on both the emotional and professional aspects of the teachers' lives.

The study confirmed that teachers are usually stereotyped by society. For instance, when they are labelled as “mentally ill” or “crazy”, it affects the motivation and professional identity of teachers. This finding is consistent with existing literature, which has previously documented the presence of emotional stigma among educators working with adolescents who have emotional and behavioral disorders (Moses, 2010).

Some of the concerns that the participants expressed include lack of awareness regarding ADHD. Most teachers reported that their work was devalued by their peers and society, because of misconceptions about the disorder, such as the belief that ADHD is an excuse for bad behavior. Such misunderstandings lead to workplace taunts and dismissive attitudes which further discourage teachers (Berri & Al-Hroub, 2016). These stereotypes, as reported by participants, created an environment where their devotion was often trivialized and challenged professional efforts. Yet again, this is reflective of other studies that misconceptions about ADHD are rampant in educational settings, sometimes leading to stigma and excluding support from teachers (Flavian & Uziely, 2022).

Moreover, social judgment and discrimination had a great effect on the mental health and professional development of teachers. Participants in this study described frustration, isolation and sadness because public stigma and professional resistance prevented them from accessing resources and opportunities for career development. These emotional states are in line with Lawrence et al., 2017, who determined that teachers of ADHD students are discriminated against and receive inadequate professional training because of stereotypes and stigmas from society and institutions. Some participants reported an inferiority complex, further indicating the negative influence of social discrimination on self-worth and esteem level among teachers (Syafriyal, 2024). The outcomes of this study further illustrated that negative labeling and stigmatization by society leads to reluctance among teachers to discuss their profession publicly. Participants identified that this causes embarrassment to peers since they fear being judged and misunderstood. This is further confirmed by studies on the negative impacts of stigma in the workplace since those who are discriminated against will shut down to avoid the related damages (Fu et al., 2019).

The present study has also emphasized that professionally, the teachers of ADHD children are mostly unrecognized and their career prospects are limited because of extreme stereotypes linked with their work. Since their job is underestimated, this might be the main reason for having limited career prospects. A lack of these opportunities could ultimately impact long-term job satisfaction and commitment. These identity barriers echo other studies that have found teachers can be a barrier to career development and lead to an inferiority complex and minimized confidence (Reilly, 2014).

### **Conclusion**

The experiences of teachers working with ADHD children in Pakistan exhibit interaction between social stigma, stereotypes and personal responses. Research reveals that negative labeling, discrimination, lack of understanding, and emotional demands on teachers are interconnected with teacher burnout, self-esteem, and professional growth, aligning with existing literature on these topics. These findings therefore suggested a supportive and inclusive environment, where the teacher needed resources, recognition and emotional support while educating ADHD students.

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