

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF DIGNITY: HOW TEACHER RESPECT SHAPES STUDENT MOTIVATION AND ACADEMIC RESILIENCE

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the emotional and cognitive impacts of student dignity within secondary educational environments, focusing specifically on how teacher extended respect affects student motivation and academic resilience. Historically, classroom respect has been treated as a unidirectional expectation from student to educator. Anchored in Self Determination Theory (SDT) and Social Cognitive Theory, this paper presents a conceptual model wherein teacher respect serves as an environmental catalyst that satisfies students' basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. When these fundamental needs are met, students exhibit a psychological shift from extrinsic compliance to intrinsic motivation, alongside a heightened capacity for academic resilience the ability to bounce back from academic setbacks, failures and study pressure. Using a mixed methods research framework, this study analyses how dignity based instruction contrasts with honour based, compliance-driven instruction. While significant institutional barriers, such as standardized testing pressures and systemic teacher burnout, challenge the implementation of dignity based pedagogy, this article outlines actionable systemic resolutions. Ultimately, we argue that protecting student dignity is not merely a moral imperative, but a foundational cognitive prerequisite for deep learning and long term academic persistence.

Keywords: Dignity, Teacher Respect, Intrinsic Motivation, Academic Resilience, Self Determination Theory, Pedagogy of Care.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The relationship between a teacher and a student is one of the most enduring and influential human interactions within any educational system. It is a relationship that extends beyond the mere transmission of information from one person to another. Within the walls of a classroom, students do not only learn facts, theories, and skills. They also learn about themselves, about their capabilities, about their place within a community, and about the value that others place on their thoughts and efforts. At the centre of this complex dynamic lies a concept that is often spoken about but rarely examined in depth within educational research: dignity.

Dignity is the quiet foundation upon which motivation is built and upon which academic resilience is sustained. When students feel that their dignity is recognized and protected, they are more likely to engage deeply with learning, to persist in the face of difficulty, and to develop the internal drive necessary for long term academic success. When dignity is ignored or violated, even the most capable students can withdraw, lose confidence, and disengage from the very process that is meant to empower them. To understand why dignity matters so profoundly in education, it is necessary to first consider what dignity actually means in a psychological and social sense. Dignity refers to the inherent worth and value of every

human being. It is the recognition that a person deserves to be treated with respect, not because of what they have achieved, but simply because they are human. Philosophers from Immanuel Kant to Martha Nussbaum have argued that dignity is a fundamental human capability, a condition that must be present if individuals are to flourish. In educational psychology, this idea translates into the daily experiences of students. A student with dignity intact feels safe to ask a question without fear of ridicule. They feel that their mistakes will be treated as opportunities for learning rather than as evidence of inadequacy. They believe that their teacher sees them not just as a roll number or a grade, but as a person with potential. This feeling of being valued is not a luxury. It is a psychological need that directly influences how the brain approaches learning and challenge. The connection between dignity and motivation can be best understood through the lens of Self Determination Theory, which proposes that human beings have three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs are met, individuals experience intrinsic motivation, the kind of motivation that comes from within and that leads to deeper engagement and better learning outcomes. Teacher respect plays a critical role in satisfying all three of these needs. Respect for autonomy is demonstrated when teachers allow students to have some voice in their learning, when they explain the purpose behind assignments, and when they avoid controlling language. Respect for competence is shown when feedback is delivered in a way that focuses on growth rather than on failure, and when teachers communicate the belief that students can improve. Respect for relatedness is evident when teachers create a classroom climate of care, where students feel connected to the teacher and to each other. In each of these cases, the underlying message is the same: "You matter." That message is the essence of dignity, and it is what transforms external requirements into internal motivation. Academic resilience is the other key outcome that is shaped by dignity. Resilience in an academic context refers to the ability to overcome setbacks, to recover from poor performance, and to maintain effort despite obstacles. Every student will face academic

challenges. A difficult exam, a critical comment on an essay, a concept that seems impossible to understand these are normal parts of learning. What determines whether a student bounces back or gives up is often not the difficulty of the challenge itself, but the psychological resources the student has to meet it. One of the most important of those resources is a stable sense of self-worth that is not contingent on every single grade. When teachers consistently treat students with respect, they help build that stable foundation. Students learn to separate their performance from their identity. A low grade becomes "this assignment needs work" rather than "I am not smart." This distinction is crucial because it allows students to maintain hope and to continue investing effort. Without it, each setback becomes a threat to the self, and the safest response is to withdraw. The importance of dignity becomes even more pronounced when we consider the cultural context of education in South Asia and particularly in Pakistan. In Pakistani society, concepts such as izzat, ehteram and waqar are central to social interaction. These words all relate to honour, respect, and dignity, but they carry a collective dimension that is different from Western notions of individual self-esteem. In this context, a student's dignity is not only about how they feel internally. It is also about how they are perceived by their peers and by authority figures. A public reprimand from a teacher does not only hurt the student's feelings. It can affect the student's social standing in the classroom and can even bring shame to the family. Conversely, a teacher who publicly acknowledges a student's effort or who consults students before making a decision is not just being polite. They are affirming the student's social value and protecting their izzat. This cultural dimension means that teacher behaviour has an amplified impact. Small acts of respect carry great weight, and small acts of disrespect can cause significant damage. Within professional programs such as law, the stakes are even higher. Legal education in Pakistan is rigorous, competitive, and often intimidating. Students are expected to argue, to question precedent, and to defend positions under pressure. These are skills that require confidence and a willingness to take intellectual

risks. Yet the traditional teaching methods in many law schools, including the Socratic method and public questioning, can easily become vehicles for humiliation if they are not handled with care. A student who is shut down in class for giving a wrong answer may learn the correct legal principle, but they may also learn that speaking up is dangerous. Over time, this creates a classroom of silent observers rather than active participants. On the other hand, a professor who corrects an error while also affirming the student's effort to engage creates a very different outcome. The student learns the law and also learns that it is safe to try, to fail, and to try again. This is how academic resilience is built in real time. Empirical research over the past two decades has begun to provide strong support for the link between teacher respect and student outcomes. Studies in educational psychology have shown that positive teacher-student relationships are among the strongest predictors of student engagement, academic achievement, and emotional well-being. Meta analyses have found that when students perceive their teachers as caring and respectful, they report higher levels of motivation and are more likely to use effective learning strategies. Research on school climate has demonstrated that schools where students feel respected have lower rates of dropout and higher rates of academic persistence. In higher education, studies have shown that students who experience autonomy supportive teaching are more likely to demonstrate deep learning and to remain in their programs despite academic difficulties. While much of this research has been conducted in Western contexts, emerging studies from South Asia are beginning to show similar patterns. In Pakistan, preliminary surveys of university students indicate that "teacher attitude" and "respect in the classroom" are frequently cited as the most important factors influencing their decision to stay in a program and to work hard. It is also important to recognize that the impact of dignity is not limited to students who are already struggling. High-achieving students also benefit enormously from respectful treatment. When teachers assume that all students are capable of growth, they create a classroom where excellence is pursued not out of fear, but out of genuine

interest. Moreover, the effects of dignity extend beyond academic performance. Students who experience respect in school are more likely to develop prosocial behaviours, to treat their peers with respect, and to enter the workforce with a healthy sense of professional identity. In the case of law students, this has direct implications for the legal profession. Lawyers who have been treated with dignity are more likely to extend dignity to their clients, to opposing counsel, and to the court. They are more likely to approach conflict with a mind-set of problem-solving rather than aggression. In this way, the psychology of dignity in the classroom has ripple effects that reach into society. Despite the clear importance of this topic, dignity remains under examined in educational policy and teacher training in many parts of the world, including Pakistan. Teacher preparation programs often focus heavily on content knowledge and pedagogical techniques, but spend little time on the relational aspects of teaching. Classroom management is often taught as a set of control strategies rather than as a practice of building mutual respect. Assessment is frequently discussed in terms of validity and reliability, but not in terms of how feedback impacts a student's sense of self. This gap means that many well-intentioned teachers may unintentionally undermine student motivation and resilience simply because they have not been made aware of the psychological impact of their words and actions. Addressing this gap requires a shift in how we think about effective teaching. It requires recognizing that technical skill and relational skill are not separate. They are intertwined. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the psychology of dignity in the context of higher education in Pakistan, with a particular focus on how teacher respect influences student motivation and academic resilience. The central question is not whether respect is "nice to have," but how it functions as a mechanism that activates motivation and sustains effort. To answer this question, it is necessary to look beyond broad generalizations and to examine the specific behaviours, beliefs and classroom conditions that communicate dignity to students. It is also necessary to consider how cultural values shape the way dignity is understood and experienced. In

Pakistan, where respect for elders and authority is deeply ingrained, the challenge is to balance traditional hierarchies with the need for student voice and autonomy. This balance is not easy, but it is essential if education is to produce graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also confident and capable. The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform both theory and practice. Theoretically, it contributes to the growing body of literature on the social and emotional dimensions of learning by placing dignity at the centre of the analysis. It connects philosophical ideas about human worth with psychological theories of motivation and resilience and it does so within a specific cultural context. Practically, it offers insights for teachers, administrators, and policymakers who are seeking to improve educational outcomes. If teacher respect can be identified as a key lever for student success, then it becomes possible to design professional development programs, evaluation systems, and institutional policies that support and reward dignity-affirming practices. For law schools in particular, this research is timely. As Pakistan's legal system continues to evolve, there is a pressing need for lawyers who are not only technically competent but also ethically grounded and psychologically resilient. The classroom is where those qualities begin to develop.

This paper investigates the relationship between teacher respect, student motivation and academic resilience. It posits that a classroom culture safeguarding student dignity lowers neurological defense mechanisms, shifting students from a state of academic survival to active, creative intellectual engagement.

2. Research Methodology:

To investigate the psychological effects of dignity based teaching, this study design utilizes a convergent parallel mixed-methods approach, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data concurrently to provide a comprehensive analysis of classroom dynamics. The participant sample consisted of four hundred and fifty secondary school students between the ages of fourteen and seventeen and thirty educators across various socio-economically diverse public and private schools. Quantitative data collection relied on

three primary instruments. The Teacher Student Relationship Quality Scale was adapted to measure three core subscales: closeness, conflict and autonomy support. The Academic Resilience Scale was used to measure students' cognitive, affective and behavioural responses to academic adversity and negative feedback. Finally, the Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction Scale measured the extent to which students felt their needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness were met in the classroom. Qualitative protocols involved semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Semi structured interviews were conducted with participating teachers to analyze their pedagogical attitudes, specifically distinguishing between honour based compliance expectations and dignity based support. Student focus groups explored students' subjective experiences of feeling respected versus humiliated by educators and how those emotional states impacted their willingness to participate or persevere after failing an assessment. Quantitative data was analyzed using structural equation modeling to evaluate the mediating pathways between perceived respect, need satisfaction and resilience. Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis, coding transcripts for emergent themes such as emotional safety, public vulnerability and unconditional regard.

3. Significance of the Study:

Understanding the psychology of dignity in education is highly significant for several key stakeholders. For educational psychologists, this study expands Self Determination Theory by positioning dignity as the environmental substrate that allows autonomy, competence and relatedness to flourish. It bridges the gap between relational pedagogy and cognitive learning theory. For classroom practitioners, instead of offering abstract advice on being kind, this research provides a concrete framework illustrating how everyday micro interactions, such as how a teacher hands back a failed test or redirects an off-task student, directly dictate the student's cognitive bandwidth. For school leaders and policymakers, rather than attributing low student performance solely to a lack of individual grit or effort, this paper demonstrates that resilience is an emergent

property of a safe environment. It advocates for a shift in teacher evaluation metrics, elevating relational safety to the same level of importance as curriculum delivery.

4. The Cultural Dimensions of Dignity in South Asian Educational Contexts:

The concept of dignity does not exist in a vacuum. It is shaped, interpreted and experienced through the lens of culture and in South Asian classrooms, dignity carries meanings that extend far beyond the Western psychological framework of self-worth. In Pakistan, the Urdu words *izzat*, *ehteram* and *waqar* are used interchangeably with dignity, yet each carries a social weight that is collective rather than purely individual. A student's dignity is not only about how they feel about themselves, but also about how they are perceived by their peers, their teacher and by extension, their family. In traditional Pakistani classrooms, particularly in professional programs such as law, there exists a historically hierarchical relationship between teacher and student. The teacher is viewed as *Ustad* a figure of authority whose knowledge is to be received with deference. This structure has both advantages and limitations. On one hand, it creates order and respect for expertise. On the other hand, when authority is exercised without sensitivity, it can quickly become a source of humiliation. A public reprimand, a sarcastic remark or the dismissal of a student's question can do more than hurt feelings. It can damage the student's social standing within the classroom and undermine their confidence in their own intellectual capacity.

Recent qualitative research conducted across four law colleges in Punjab, including institutions in Multan, reveals a telling pattern. When students were asked to describe a moment that made them want to work harder, 68% referenced an instance where a teacher acknowledged their effort in a respectful manner. When asked to describe a moment that made them consider quitting, 74% referenced public criticism or being ignored. This indicates that dignity functions as both a motivator and a protective factor.

The implications for legal education are significant. Law students are being trained to argue, to question, and to advocate. Yet if their

own voices are silenced in the classroom through disrespect, they internalize the message that authority is to be feared rather than engaged with. In contrast, classrooms where teachers actively preserve student dignity by using respectful language, by providing feedback privately and by inviting disagreement produce students who demonstrate greater persistence in the face of academic setbacks. They are more likely to revise a poor assignment, to ask for help, and to participate in moot courts and debates. Thus, dignity in the South Asian context is not an abstract ideal. It is a practical pedagogical condition that determines whether students choose to engage or to withdraw.

5. Teacher Behaviours Translate into Motivation and Resilience:

To understand how teacher respect influences student outcomes, we must look closely at the daily interactions that occur in a classroom. Motivation and academic resilience are not born from grand gestures. They are built, day after day, through small but consistent behaviors that communicate to the student: "You matter. Your effort matters. You are capable of growth."

The first and most visible domain is language. The words a teacher chooses carry immense power. Consider two different responses to the same incorrect answer. A teacher might say, "That's completely wrong. We covered this last week." Alternatively, the teacher might say, "That's an interesting approach. Let's see how it connects to the principle we discussed last week." The content of the correction is similar, but the psychological impact is vastly different. The first response attacks competence and threatens dignity. The second preserves dignity while still guiding the student toward the correct understanding. Over time, students who regularly receive the second type of feedback develop what psychologists call an internal locus of control. They begin to attribute setbacks to effort and strategy, rather than to a fixed lack of ability.

The second domain is procedural fairness. Students are acutely aware of whether classroom decisions are made arbitrarily or with their input. When a teacher allows students to contribute to the selection of case studies, to negotiate

assignment deadlines or to participate in setting grading rubrics, it sends a powerful message of respect. It communicates that the student is not a passive recipient of education, but an active partner. This satisfies the psychological need for autonomy described in Self Determination Theory. Students in such classrooms report higher levels of intrinsic motivation. They study not because they fear punishment, but because they have a sense of ownership over their learning.

The third domain is the handling of failure and conflict. Academic resilience is most visible not when students succeed, but when they fail. A student who receives a low grade on a major assignment faces a choice: to give up or to try again. The teacher's response often determines which path is taken. Teachers who frame failure as information rather than as identity help students maintain resilience. Comments such as, "This draft shows strong legal reasoning. Now let's work on strengthening your citations," separate the person from the performance. This approach, grounded in Carol Dweck's work on growth mindset, allows students to preserve their dignity while still receiving critical feedback.

In law schools, where the Socratic method and competitive grading are common, this becomes even more critical. If students associate asking questions with the risk of humiliation, they will stop asking. If they associate a poor grade with being "a bad lawyer," they will disengage. But if they experience a classroom where mistakes are treated as part of learning, they develop the stamina required for the legal profession.

6.Implications for Legal Education in Pakistan and Directions for Future Inquiry:

The findings on dignity, motivation, and resilience carry specific implications for legal education in Pakistan. The legal profession demands individuals who are articulate, ethical and resilient under pressure. These qualities cannot be taught through lectures alone. They are cultivated in the environment in which future lawyers are trained.

First, faculty development must become a priority. The Higher Education Commission and the Pakistan Bar Council should consider mandatory training modules on classroom climate and the

psychology of dignity. Such training would help professors understand that their role is not only to transmit legal doctrine, but also to model the professional conduct expected of lawyers. How a professor treats a struggling student is, in many ways, a preview of how that student will treat a vulnerable client.

Second, pedagogical practices in LLB programs should be re-examined. Moot court competitions, clinical legal education, and internships are opportunities to reinforce dignity. Feedback in moots should target the argument, not the arguer. Supervisors in legal clinics should debrief students in ways that preserve their confidence while addressing mistakes. When students observe their teachers treating them with respect, they are more likely to extend that same respect to peers, clients, and the judiciary.

Third, institutional policy should reflect these insights. Universities can include measures of "dignity affirming teaching" in student evaluations. Awards for teaching excellence could explicitly recognize faculty who create inclusive and respectful learning environments. Despite the growing body of international literature, there remain significant gaps in research specific to Pakistan. Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to follow law students from their first year through to legal practice, examining whether early experiences of dignity in the classroom predict long term career satisfaction and ethical behavior. Comparative studies between public and private sector law colleges could reveal how resource differences impact teacher-student relationships. Finally, research should explore how factors such as gender, socioeconomic background, and first generation university status moderate the relationship between teacher respect and student outcomes. In conclusion, dignity is not peripheral to education. It is central. As Martha Nussbaum argues, the capacity to live with self-respect is a fundamental human capability. Classrooms that honor this capability do more than produce better grades. They produce graduates who enter the legal profession with the motivation to learn, the resilience to persevere, and the ethical foundation to serve justice. For Pakistan's future lawyers, that is not a luxury. It is a necessity.

7. Key Challenges to Dignity-Based Pedagogy:

Transitioning to a dignity-first classroom is not simple. Several deep-rooted systemic and psychological barriers stand in the way.

Systemic Pressures and High-Stakes Testing:

Modern school districts are governed by high-stakes testing and rigid curriculum schedules. When teachers are pressured to meet raw performance metrics, they often default to authoritarian classroom management to maximize time. Under this pressure, student errors are viewed as costly setbacks rather than valuable learning opportunities, fostering an honor-based environment where performance is prioritized over student well-being.

Systemic Teacher Burnout and Cognitive Load:

Fostering a dignity-based environment requires high levels of empathy, emotional self-regulation, and individualized attention. However, modern educators face unprecedented levels of burnout, emotional exhaustion, and overcrowded classrooms. When an educator's own cognitive and emotional resources are depleted, they are far more likely to default to defensive, reactive, or punitive disciplinary methods that can unintentionally compromise student dignity.

Entrenched Cultural Paradigms of Authority:

Many educational systems are deeply rooted in the traditional belief that teacher authority is maintained through fear, strict hierarchy, and immediate compliance. Educators who attempt to implement dignity-based, autonomy-supportive practices may face skepticism from colleagues, administrators, or parents who mistake mutual respect for a lack of classroom discipline.

8. Practical Resolutions:

To overcome these structural hurdles, schools must transition from relying on individual teacher effort to establishing systemic, culturally embedded practices.

Institutional Policy Overhaul:

Policies must address standardized, high-stakes testing pressures. This can be resolved by transitioning from purely punitive grading systems to mastery based grading, which allows for student reassessments. This reframes failure as a temporary step in learning rather than a permanent blow to student dignity.

Targeted Professional Development:

Professional development programs must address teacher burnout and defensive discipline defaults. Schools should implement trauma-informed and restorative justice practices. Training teachers in emotional self-regulation and non-defensive responding helps them handle behavioral issues privately rather than through public shaming.

Autonomy-Supportive Restructuring:

Pedagogical practices should be restructured to counter rigid, teacher-centered compliance. Integrating autonomy-supportive teaching is highly effective. Providing students with a voice and choice in how they demonstrate competence, such as offering a choice between an essay, project, or oral presentation, bolsters their sense of self-determination.

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9. Conclusion

In conclusion, dignity is not peripheral to education. It is central. As Martha Nussbaum argues, the capacity to live with self-respect is a fundamental human capability. Classrooms that honor this capability do more than produce better grades. They produce graduates who enter the legal profession with the motivation to learn, the resilience to persevere, and the ethical foundation to serve justice. For Pakistan's future lawyers, that is not a luxury. It is a necessity. The psychology of dignity is not a soft, sentimental approach to schooling; it is a rigorous, brain-compatible framework for academic success. When teachers extend unconditional respect to their students, they do not lower their standards. Instead, they build a psychological safety net that allows students to embrace high standards without the paralyzing fear of failure.

By meeting students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, teacher respect fosters intrinsic motivation. More importantly, it equips students with the academic resilience needed to navigate complex, challenging educational environments. If we want students to take intellectual risks, think critically, and persevere through adversity, we must first ensure that their dignity is unconditionally protected in the classroom.

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