

TEACHERS' RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEALING WITH WORKPLACE BULLYING IN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' recommendations for dealing with workplace mistreatment of teachers. While a limited amount of research has been conducted regarding teachers' experiences with mistreatment or bullying by their administrators, no research has addressed specific ways for teachers to deal with the mistreatment. The teachers who participated in this study offered suggestions for steps teachers could take to protect themselves if they were being bullied or mistreated by their administrator. Teachers suggested a need for educating themselves about policies and state codes of ethics; how to document the perceived mistreatment and their responses to it; and finding sources of support for themselves.

Keywords: teacher mistreatment, K-12 education, bullying in schools

Bullying is a continuing problem in education, with many schools teaching students and staff about prevention (Robers, Kemp, & Truman, 2013; Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010). However, far fewer conversations are had about the bullying of teachers in schools. Workplace bullying (sometimes referred to as “mobbing” or “mistreatment”) is a pervasive issue; nearly half of all working adults have experienced bullying and mistreatment in the workplace (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010) and 27% of U.S. workers report being bullied at any point in time (Workplace Bullying Institute, 2014). Often, this mistreatment goes unpunished. Hall (2005) stated that only 13% of workplace bullies face consequences for their actions while 87 percent of the victims eventually leave their jobs as a result of bullying.

Bullying and mistreatment are exhibited through negative communication including spreading rumors and public embarrassment (Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012), rude and abusive language (Vega & Comer, 2005), explosive outbursts including yelling and screaming (Blasè & Blasè, 2006; Lutgen-Sandvik, Namie, & Namie, 2009). What sets bullying apart from other negative communication is the persistence (De Wet, 2010; Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012). A single incident between two individuals of equal power is not considered bullying (Hauge, 2010).

Prior research by Fox and Stallworth (2010) found that nearly half of teachers had been mistreated by their supervisors. With an already high rate of teacher turnover in schools (Ost & Schiman, 2015), teachers need ways to help them deal with mistreatment if they feel they are experiencing it from an administrator. If teachers can resolve the problem; they may choose to stay at their school or move to another school instead of leaving the teaching profession. The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' recommendations for dealing with mistreatment. The participants in this study are teachers who feel their administrators have mistreated them and they offer valuable insight into how they successfully dealt with the mistreatment or how they were able to leave the school where they were mistreated and move to a different school.

Literature Review

Workplace Bullying in Schools

Despite an increasing body of research related to workplace bullying, definitions of bullying vary (Georgakopoulos, Wilkin, & Kent, 2011). Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, and Cooper (2011) define workplace bullying as:

... harassing, offending, or socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process, the bullying behaviour has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g. weekly) and over a period of time (e.g. about six months). Bullying is an escalating process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts. A conflict cannot be called bullying if the incident is an isolated event or if two parties of approximately equal strength are in conflict (p. 22).

Blasè, Blasè, and Du (2008) define bullying as "any behavior – verbal, nonverbal, and physical (excluding physical violence) – that, in the teacher's perception, causes psychological-emotional, physical-physiological, personal, and/or professional harm to oneself" (p. 265).

Various specific behaviors have been categorized as bullying in an education setting. School administrators who engaged in bullying of their teachers used threatening behavior, verbally abused teachers, treated teachers disrespectfully, socially isolated teachers from their peers, showed favoritism towards certain teachers, and engaged in nepotism (Blasè & Blasè, 2006; De Wet, 2014). Administrators also publicly humiliated teachers in front of their colleagues and/or students and set their teachers up to fail, tried to ruin their reputations, and unfairly criticized teachers. Administrators sometimes ignored the boundaries between teachers' personal and professional lives, setting rules about the friends they could have or the clothes they could wear (De Wet, 2014).

While teachers may be versed in identifying and dealing with bullying in their classrooms, they often have difficulties recognizing when they are the victims of bullying. Bullying in education is more prevalent than in many other professions (Fahie & Devine, 2014). Fox and Stallworth (2010) found that 46.5% of teachers were subjected to pervasive bullying by their supervisors. Due to the loss of income incurred by teachers who leave their current employment, many suffer the abuse for longer than the 23-month average (Hall, 2005).

In education, the bullying and mistreatment of teachers may come from an administrator or fellow teachers (De Wet, 2010). According to De Wet (2014), principals were the main aggressors targeting those in positions of lesser power. The victims often lacked power and job security. Some were new teachers, and/or were pregnant. De Wet (2014) also found that sometimes the victims were those who did not fit in well socially with their colleagues in their schools.

“Bullying at work continues only when organizational cultures condone, model, or reward it” (Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012, p. 8). Thus, to address problems with bullying, an organizational approach is necessary; concentrating on individuals may be ineffective, especially if the organizational culture supports aggression. An organization’s cultural and social beliefs must also be considered when trying to advance change—if the beliefs foster aggression, organizational change will likely not occur (Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012). Namie and Lutgen-Sandvik (2010) found that in more than 70% of the cases of workplace bullying, upper level management took no steps to address the problems or actually worsened the problem. Organizational communication may serve to silence the victims of bullying. Especially when the bully holds a position of power, other employees may be hesitant to speak out or resist. Peers may offer support or assistance to the victims of bullying, but they may also be paralyzed and do nothing, often for fear of becoming a target themselves (Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012). Teachers may blame themselves for the abuse and are therefore less likely to discuss it with colleagues (Hall, 2005).

Often, administrators target the most competent and knowledgeable teachers; administrators who engage in these practices view these teachers as competition (Parsons, 2005). Teachers may also be targeted if they are well respected by their colleagues and parents. Administrators may feel threatened if teachers turn to another teacher for advice and guidance rather than to them (Parsons, 2005). Administrators who micro-manage may resent the loss of control if a teacher is a self-starter and works independently (Parsons, 2005). Blasè et al. (2008) found that some principals mistreat teachers because of personality issues, inability to handle stress, gender issues, faulty assumptions about power, lack of awareness about best ways to use power, and lack of awareness of the effect of administrative behavior.

Some administrators who bully and mistreat their staff may be unaware that their behavior is offensive. Instead, they see that this behavior is what has caused them to advance in their careers, putting them in positions of authority, so they may feel a sense of superiority. In order for their behavior to change, these administrators need increased self-recognition (Parsons, 2005). In addition, teachers' lack of awareness of the grievance processes in place may perpetuate bullying in schools (De Wet, 2014). Teachers may also choose to not pursue a grievance against an administrator who has bullied them (De Wet, 2010).

Consequences

Prior research has found that the mistreatment of teachers may negatively affect teaching and learning in schools (Beale & Hoel, 2011; De Wet, 2010). Blasè et al. (2008) found that bullying negatively affected teachers' classroom behaviors. For instance, teachers reported that "they were less caring, patient, tolerant, and humorous toward students and that they were forced to use rigid, dated, and authoritarian, ineffective teaching methods with students" (Blasè et al., 2008, p. 290). Teachers reported they had difficulty concentrating at work and stated that during their preparation periods, they did not do any work as a result of being bullied (Jacobs & De Wet, 2015).

Dhar (2012) found that workplace bullying may lead to lower employee morale, increased absences from work, and lower levels of employee motivation. Teachers experienced decreased job satisfaction (De Wet, 2010) and distrust of their colleagues (Jacobs & De Wet, 2015), as a result of being bullied at their schools. Teachers expressed that, as a result of being bullied by their administrators, they experienced less loyalty to their employers, job burnout, apathy, and withdrew from professional activities (Blasè et al., 2008).

Bullying also negatively affected teachers' personal lives (Blasè & Blasè, 2002, 2004, 2006; Blasè et al., 2008; De Wet, 2010; Jacobs & De Wet, 2015). Blasè et al. (2008) found the harmful effects of bullying included: stress, resentment, depression, anger, insecurity, self-doubt, a sense of powerlessness, feelings of fear and dread, sleep disruptions, and obsessive thoughts about their administrator. Teachers who perceived they were bullied stated that they had increased blood pressure, headaches, and other health issues (Jacobs & De Wet, 2015).

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' experiences with and perceptions of mistreatment from their administrators. The research question that guided this study was: If teachers feel an administrator has mistreated them, what steps should they take to protect themselves? These data

come from a larger mixed methods study designed to investigate teachers' experiences with and perceptions of mistreatment by their administrators; data were collected via surveys and interviews. This paper focuses on the interview component of the study.

Participant Selection

The researcher recruited K-12 public school teachers to participate in this study. To solicit teacher participation, a state-level teacher professional association assisted in distributing the survey link. Participants who wished to participate in an interview about their experiences provided their email address; approximately 50 teachers provided their email addresses and 26 responded to my request for an interview. Teachers determined whether they felt they had been mistreated; therefore, their perceptions of what constitutes mistreatment may vary.

Data Collection

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 26 participants. Of these, two interviewees requested to respond to the interview questions in writing due to time constraints, five were conducted face-to-face at a location of the participant's choosing, and nineteen were conducted via phone or Skype. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two and a half hours. I asked the participants to describe their teaching experience and their experiences with mistreatment by their administrators. This paper focuses on teachers' responses to two interview questions: 1). After having these experiences with your administrator, what recommendations do you have for preventing the mistreatment of teachers by administrators? and 2). If a teacher is currently being mistreated by an administrator, how would you suggest his/herself?

Data Analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. I read all transcripts in their entirety, then imported them into NVivo for coding. Some possible themes appeared during data collection, so I included these as codes. I also added emergent codes as I read each transcript again. Some of these codes were questions while others were more descriptive. Once I completed the first round of coding, I reread each transcript to ensure that I had captured participants' experiences with mistreatment by their administrators. After coding was complete, I created a matrix to organize the results of my analysis. One column listed my codes, another the themes, and another contained the relevant quotes to support each theme. This showed how some codes combined to create themes and allowed me to determine if the themes were well supported by the data.

Trustworthiness and Dependability

To enhance the trustworthiness and dependability of this study, I engaged in member checking, peer debriefing, and keeping a research journal (Creswell, 2013). I provided willing participants with drafts of the preliminary results to see if they felt I adequately represented their views. I also engaged in peer debriefing with a colleague who read my reflexive journal as well as the paper. My journal served as a way for me to reflect on my biases throughout the study and to document my research process. While I do not have first-hand experience with being mistreated by my administrator, my participants' stories did affect me emotionally and the journal was an important way to acknowledge my bias and attempt to minimize it as much as possible.

Findings

According to the findings, many teachers offered suggestions for steps teachers could take to protect themselves if they were being bullied or mistreated by their administrator. Educating teachers about their rights and increasing their knowledge of how to protect themselves and their jobs was one of the most prevalent themes in the qualitative data. Their suggestions for how to educate themselves can be categorized into three areas: educating themselves on policies and state codes of ethics; learning how to document the perceived mistreatment and their responses to it; and finding sources of support for themselves.

Educating Themselves

Teachers felt that not only did they need to educate themselves on their codes of ethics and district policies, they also should be aware of how to document any mistreatment occurring. About half of the teachers placed some of the burden on themselves; while they felt administrators should not be treating them abusively, they also believed that they needed to protect themselves. One teacher said, "We need to be more knowledgeable." Another commented, "Here, the union isn't as strong as when I was in [another state]. So, it's more on us to educate ourselves and take advantage of the support our association provides." Another teacher mentioned that teachers need to be aware of discrimination policies and codes of ethics to protect themselves.

However, even when teachers were aware of the code of ethics and felt an administrator violated it, few teachers were willing to file grievances against an administrator or bring violations of the code of ethics to the attention of district-level administrators. Many teachers mentioned that they feared retaliation from their administrators and did not feel as if they would be protected if they spoke out. A former high school teacher provides her thoughts on teachers speaking out against their administrators:

Everybody is afraid to speak up. I think that even if there was a way for teachers to anonymously speak up, but there is not. If you speak out on your own, like, this is who I am and I am saying something about this treatment and how we are being treated and how things are going on in our school, then you have the fear of being recognized. It is kind of catch 22. There is really no good way for teachers to file complaints with that culture of fear.

One teacher, who had served as a teacher association representative, commented on the teachers who came to him regarding problems with administrators:

Part of the problem is the teachers. And I say that because I can't tell you how many of them come to me with a serious problem which involves abuse by the principal. But as soon as you suggest they file a grievance, oh no.

He said that many of the teachers told him they feared retaliation if they spoke up about their administrator's behavior. He said teachers told him, "I don't want to put a target on my back." He said he understood the fear, but also felt it was unreasonable.

Some teachers described how they had filed grievances against administrators while others took different approaches to deal with the perceived mistreatment. However, many teachers expressed confusion over the grievance processes in place at their various districts. One teacher explained that at his district, "If the grievance was against the person who was here at level one, you went straight to level two. You didn't have to grieve to the person you were grieving." He said that he was "grateful they were able to do that".

One teacher stated, "If the behavior is tolerated, things will get worse." He said that teachers need to file grievances against their principals to stop the bullying, but acknowledges that many are scared to do so. In addition, several participants believed that in order to file a grievance against their principal or assistant principal, they had to first speak with their principal, as is the standard grievance procedure in most districts in this state. However, teachers may file a grievance against their administrator with their administrator's supervisor, sparing teachers the process of directly confronting their administrator to begin the process. Their lack of knowledge of this option suggests that greater education is needed to inform teachers of their rights and options should they feel they are being mistreated or bullied by their administrators. One teacher suggested that grievances should go directly to the school board, removing both administrators and the district office from the process.

Documenting Teacher and Administrator Behaviors

Many teachers believed that the best way to protect themselves if they felt an administrator was bullying them was to document meetings, conversations, write ups, and other related events. Teachers documented both their own behaviors as well as their administrators'. One teacher shared the commonality she noticed with the teachers who were able to stop the mistreatment:

It came down to the ones who were able to fight it and get it to stop, it's because they documented everything. When they had a meeting with their administrator they took in their notebook and took notes. And they would follow up with emails to just confirm that this is what they talked about and things like that.

"We also need to document everything," a teacher advised. "My evaluations had been deleted from my school email, but because I cc'd everything to my personal email, I had them still." This teacher was able to file a lawsuit against her school district because she had documented her activities as well as her principal's. She was also able to transfer from the school where she felt bullied, even though she was on a growth plan, because she had documented her principal's behaviors and the human resources director

Another teacher, who transferred from the school where she felt bullied by her administrator, believes that the reason she was able to leave is because she documented what her principal said to her. "I think, that is why the head of HR (human resources) was so kind to me," she said. She explained how she documented what happened to her, saying:

I had a spiral notebook and my principal knew, she didn't care. I would flop it out and I was like, I am writing down every word she says and I am going to date and time it. When I emailed the head of Special Education and the coordinator for them to come watch me, I would make it in an email. It was always email so I could print it off, but I had enough documentation by the end of the year and I had been in HR so much my principal was not allowed to talk to me without an HR rep there.

Documenting conversations and actions allowed this teacher to move successfully to another school. She feels that if she had not documented events, she would either still be at that school or she would have left teaching altogether."

An elementary teacher recorded conversations between herself and her principal using her phone. She stated that it is legal in the state "as long as one person knows" the recorder is on. "At that time I felt I needed to do it for protection," she explained. She also rebutted one of her observations because the administrator did not follow proper procedures.

Support

Several teachers wanted the teacher associations to offer assistance and education to their members. One teacher suggested a campaign to educate teachers about their rights and how to deal with problems with their administrators. He said, “It could be boiled down into a paper that personal reps at schools and active people like myself in the [teacher association] could share.” He feels that teachers should “at least have somebody that is on their side, giving them information on how to fight this politely and not lose your job.”

Several teachers mentioned that the power difference between themselves and their administrators contributed to their reluctance to address any problems they perceived. One teacher felt that because she was relatively young when she started teaching, she was unaware of the ways to address problems with administrators. She also thinks her age contributed to her perceptions of administrator power. She commented:

I really felt intimidated by their authority with my relative youth, you know? There was a big intimidation factor. By having to sit down in their office with them and their big desk and me in my little chair, there was a lot of intimidation. Had these meetings happened in my classroom sitting down at two desks there would have been a whole different power play there.

She feels that if she had been more aware of how her feelings of powerlessness contributed to her lack of awareness of how to address the problems she had with her administrators. She said that if she faced the same problem now, she would deal with it by involving her union, talking to human resources, and requesting that the meetings be held in her classroom.

Some teachers also recommended that teachers join a professional association for additional support and information. A former middle school teacher suggested:

On a teacher level, I think there needs to be a lot more education about where you can go. And I think that HR departments need to be more active in telling people that there is a safe space. I still don't know if that space is safe. I don't know if I could have gone and made this report and then stayed off of a black list of some sort. So I also am always going to push young teachers into being part of a union for question asking.

Other teachers echoed these comments and felt that the professional associations offered teachers a place to turn for information and support if they encountered problems with their administrators.

Implications and Conclusions

In sharing their suggestions for ways teachers can deal with mistreatment, participants outlined three main areas for improvement: educating themselves on policies and state codes of ethics; how to

document the perceived mistreatment and their responses to it; and finding sources of support for themselves. By providing information on how to deal with workplace bullying to both preservice and in-service teachers, teacher educators may help reduce the instances of bullying and mistreatment of teachers.

Many people do not speak out if they feel they are being mistreated in the workplace (Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012). For in-service teachers, knowing where to turn for support if they feel they are being mistreated is essential, according to participants. If teachers possess a better understanding of where to seek help and what avenues are available to them should they choose to take action against their administrator, they may be more likely to hold their administrators accountable for their actions or take steps to remove themselves from the situation. All of the teachers in this study who were able to leave the schools where they felt mistreated did so because they were educated on how to protect themselves. They documented both their actions and their administrators', they sought support from their professional associations and human resources, and they educated themselves about policies that offer them protection.

Prior research showed that teachers lack an awareness of the grievance process and may choose to not pursue grievances against administrators they feel has bullied them (De Wet, 2010, 2014). However, this failure to pursue a grievance may lead to a continuation of bullying in schools (De Wet, 2014). Teacher educators should consider including resources for their preservice teachers so that when they are in their own classrooms in the future, they are prepared if problems with an administrator arise. Based on these results, there is no one-size-fits all solution; however, if teachers are equipped with multiple options and if they know how to protect themselves, they are more likely to have a positive outcome if they choose to file a grievance or move to a new school.

Despite provisions in state codes of ethics banning much of the behavior teachers considered as bullying or mistreatment, teachers hesitate to speak out about mistreatment. Educators should also consider creating ways for teachers to anonymously ask questions about their particular situations so they can get advice without taking formal actions. Due to the fear about speaking out, many teachers chose to take no action against administrators they felt were mistreating them. Teachers should be able to get information about the steps they can take to deal with problems without fear of retaliation.

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation of this research is that the results may not generalize to the greater population of teachers. The participants self-selected into this study and therefore, may have certain characteristics that differ from other teachers who have experienced mistreatment from their administrators and chose not to participate. In addition, the data were collected from teachers employed in a single state; conditions in other states may differ and these results may not be relevant.

Future research should explore the administrators' perspectives. In order to protect these participants, research with their administrators cannot be ethically conducted. However, research on what administrators view as mistreatment and bullying could shed additional light on this topic. Also, this study was conducted primarily with teachers from a single right-to-work state. Future research should explore teachers' experiences with mistreatment in other states as well as determine additional ways teachers have found to prevent mistreatment and bullying as well as ways they have fought back against their bullies, and won.

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