

SPECIAL INTEREST ARTICLE

Workplace Bullying: Teacher-on-Teacher

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Abstract

Workplace bullying is a known issue in society, and is most prevalent in education. Nevertheless, teacher-on-teacher bullying is a taboo topic of discussion. Bullying is repeated acts or verbal comments made to the victim as a way of controlling and demonstrating power over the individual. These acts could cause a multitude of psychological or physical effects on the victim. Taking care of oneself mentally and physically is imperative. Exploring a holistic approach to healing helps the victim to heal emotionally, physically, and spiritually.

Teacher-on-teacher bullying is a very personal subject for me. I am a victim of workplace bullying at my school. I always thought a person had to be weak to be bullied, and I am not a weak person. Speaking up early on provides the best opportunity to stop the bullying behaviour before it becomes a long-term occurrence (Ziv, 2020). The bullying I experienced happened so smoothly and slyly that I did not realize it was happening until it was too late and other parents and community members got involved. The whole experience made me evaluate myself as a teacher, friend, parent, and member of society.

Workplace Bullying Among Colleagues in Schools

Workplace bullying has been recognized as a serious problem. Compared to any other profession, bullying is most prevalent in education (Orange, 2018). Teacher-on-teacher bullying happens far too often (Mulvahill, 2020). Understanding teacher-on-teacher bullying relies on knowing the definition of workplace bullying, why someone feels the need to bully another person, the effects it has on the victim, how leadership plays a role, and the effects that bullying has on others.

Teacher-on-teacher workplace bullying is different than student bullying. It is more than the occasional meanness or common conflict issues (Mulvahill, 2020). Bullying occurs over a period of time with frequent direct or indirect acts towards an individual. It is not always easily identifiable (Merilainen et al., 2019). Acts of bullying may include rude and abusive language, spreading rumors, public embarrassment, and isolation in a repetitive, negative manner. Workplace bullying is the overall mistreatment of a person (Orange, 2018). Having experienced workplace bullying myself, it has been one of the most difficult and stressful situations I had to deal with in my life. I was never popular as a child because I was always opinionated and stood up for what I believed was right. Dealing with bullying both as a child and now as an adult, I can attest that workplace bullying is extremely different and considerably tougher to manage.

Bullying is all about the power imbalance between the bully and the victim. The reason a person bullies another individual is to be superior to the other person, wanting to make the victim feel inferior and alone (Mulvahill, 2020). The victims feel unable to defend themselves in a situation (Merilainen et al., 2019). The bully wears down the victim (Maruro, 2015) and manipulates school culture by ostracizing, snubbing, and excluding the victim. The bully has the victims believing that they are inadequate, ineffective, and deserving of the negative behaviours. Often, the bullies think that they are just doing their jobs and fail to identify their actions as bullying (Merilainen et al., 2016). Once the victim sees this narrative, the bully's action appears logical and the power cycle is complete.

Bullying plays a toll on a person in multiple ways. Victims suffer traumatic effects from bullying mentally, physically, socially, and emotionally (Fachie & Devine, 2014). Bullying is a trauma to the victim, which generates severe emotional reactions such as anxiety, shock, fear, helplessness, and

negative self-worth (Maiuro, 2015). I have personally experienced many of these emotions. Many victims of bullying suffer from severe health problems, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress symptoms (Maiuro, 2015). The consequences of such exposure to bullying may be both psychologically and physically debilitating for the victim.

The most common physical effect of workplace bullying is sleeplessness or disturbed sleep, including horrible dreams. The bullying experiences invade their subconscious and trigger violent dreams. Other physical effects include headaches, stomach pains, skin irritation, weight gain or loss, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. Psychological effects influence individuals in different ways. Everyone can experience a wide range of effects, from no psychological effects to suicidal thoughts. Victims will often experience a loss of sense of self and where they are positioned in the world (Fachie & Devine, 2014). Victims of bullying take a hit to their confidence and morale. The entire experience is extremely stressful and can be painful (Mulvahill, 2020). Victims of workplace bullying suffer from insecurities, anxiety, vengefulness, poor social skills to protect their own self-esteem, personality conflicts, and gender issues (Orange, 2018). Victims use several negative coping strategies to deal with bullying, such as seeking revenge, substance abuse, suppressing emotional responses, and alcohol consumption (Fachie & Devine, 2014). These actions compound the physical and psychological effects that the victim already suffers.

The victims continue to suffer in their workplace while trying to teach, and from the financial effect of missed days of work due to the bullying. Workplace bullying negatively affects teaching and learning in schools. The victims are less tolerant, humorous, and patient. They suffer from difficulty concentrating and using their prep time effectively (Orange, 2018). It is difficult to say whether the victims have low self-esteem or anxiety, which makes them more likely to be bullied and could be a result of the long-term workplace bullying (Merilainen et al., 2016). Teachers who suffer from workplace bullying take increased sick days. Bullying-based teachers' sick leave costs the Finnish Trade Union of Education nearly 15 million dollars a year. The costs do not stop there. The organizations have additional costs associated to workplace bullying, such as legal costs, loss of productivity, reputation, and the overall organizational culture. Society also experiences hardship through growing medical costs and premature retirement.

Bullying in schools is a systemic problem that can be related to leadership practices. Bullies often seek allies with leaders and get into leadership positions because of it. It is difficult to make bullies accountable or even acknowledge that the problem exists if the organization is allied with them (Merilaine et al., 2016). Bullying is commonly fostered by poor ineffective leadership that contributes to the destructive and unhealthy behaviour in the workplace. Ineffective leaders avoid confronting the problem and are indifferent to the bullying situation (Fachie, 2014). When upper management does not address the bullying behaviour, it makes the problem worse (Orange, 2016). Leaders can enable or even include bullying behaviours. Leadership practices and social relationships contribute to the issue (Merilainen et al., 2019). Some school administrators engage in bullying of their teachers by using threatening behaviour, disrespecting teachers, verbally abusing, socially isolating, showing favoritism, and nepotism (Orange, 2018). As demands and unclear work expectations increase related to "tasks, obligations, privileges, and priorities," there is the potential of increased bullying behaviour towards others (Maiuro, 2015, p. 139). Change needs to happen at the organizational level, which is more effective than with just an individual. When workplace bullying is condoned by leaders in the organization, the bullying will only continue. Administrators will skillfully create teaching assignments with the purpose of isolating the victim in order to avoid having to deal with conflict. This tactic only makes the situation worse on the victim and can quickly lead the victim to depression and wanting to quit teaching.

Bullying affects everyone: the victim, the victim's family, and the bystanders. This creates an undesirable workplace (Merilainen et al., 2016). Negative school climate festers over years, and uses human dignity and worth as currency for abuse and manipulation (Fachie, 2014). A bullying situation takes its toll on relationships and family life, and is costly for the company due to turnover, absenteeism, and reduced productivity (Maiuro, 2015). The victims often withdrawal from family and friends.

The bystander usually takes one of three positions: people who intervene, people who do not dare intervene, and people who blame the victim. Those who choose to blame the victim often participate in the bullying acts (Merilainen et al., 2016). A private Facebook group called We Are Teachers HELPLINE has over 44 000 members (WeAreTeacher HELPLINE, n.d., Home [Facebook page]). With so many Facebook members, it is clear that bullying affects everyone the individual is associated with, the victim, the victim's family, and the bystanders. With so many Facebook members, it is obvious that this is a pressing issue affecting many educators.

Many teachers walk away from the profession because of bullying. Given the definition of workplace bullying, the characteristics of a bully, the effects it has on the victim, the leadership role, and the effects on others, it is evident why one out of four victims of workplace bullying leave their jobs (Maiuro, 2015). The teaching profession has higher rates of workplace bullying than any other profession (Fachie, 2014). The result of bullying affects teacher retention due to the continued stress on the teacher.

Becoming a Better You After the Trauma of Being Bullied

There are many ways to solve a problem, and bullying is no different. From personal experience, I believe the holistic view is the most prevalent approach to self-preservation when dealing with the trauma of being bullied. Holistic healing is looking at the whole person in all aspects of life, including the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual disposition of a person. Therefore, the holistic approach is the most effective for lasting and long-term change in a person (*What Is Holistic Healing?* n.d.). Bullying takes a major toll both at work and outside of work. The bullied need to try to find a healthy balance between the negative and the positive influences in their lives (Ziv, 2020). Understanding the holistic approach to healing involves exploring the emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects of oneself.

Bullying can be incredibly traumatic and affects the victim emotionally. In the first phase of bullying trauma, people who are bullied may struggle with regulating or soothing their emotions in everyday life (*Phases*, n.d.). In your everyday interactions, ensure that you are modelling and supporting ethical behaviour. You want to treat others the way you want to be treated (Solon, 2014). Having a support system is an invaluable resource every person needs to remain healthy. A support system includes mentors, people who can guide you, teach and challenge you in a respectful way, and compassionate individuals. This could include other teachers, spiritual leaders or spiritual advisors, elders, physicians, mental health workers, psychiatrists, psychologists, Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counsellors, and many others (*Phases*, n.d.). You should also seek support from your teachers' union (Ziv, 2020). They are available to support you as a member. If you decide to make a complaint, make sure you do your research. Check to see whether your division has a policy about bullying, mistreatment, verbal abuse, and so on. Most school divisions have policies to protect their employees (Ziv, 2020). Teachers in Manitoba pay union dues with the expectations that the union will provide support with any problems you may encounter.

As human beings, we can be very critical of our thoughts and judge our weakness and struggles in a way we would never view or express to a friend. Treating ourselves kindly is a foreign concept to many people. We must remember to give ourselves a break and cut ourselves some slack (*Phases*, n.d.). When talking to a bully, you could call attention to their values, stating you know they have good intentions and really care about how everyone needs to feel valued. Then suggest for them to try in the future to avoid having their intentions misunderstood. Repeating the bully's name often when speaking to the bully helps make the conversation more human and personal (Ziv, 2020). Many victims shrug off the initial bullying incidents and do not speak up for months. By this time, the power imbalance has been cemented into place. If you speak up after months of abuse, the bullying actions will likely not stop but take a turn for the worse and intensify (Ziv, 2020). It may be difficult to approach the bully, and the victim often ends up leaving their job to find new employment somewhere else to solve the problem.

Through my experience with being a victim of workplace bullying, it was a rollercoaster of emotions, questioning my choice of careers, and questioning who I am as a person and how I interact with society. The next phase of healing involves the important task of mourning the losses involved with the trauma of bullying, and the space required to grieve and express one's emotions (*Phases*, n.d.). After the initial shock and slight realization of what was happening to me, I took steps toward healing. Taking care of myself in a holistic manner grounded me and offered me the ability to work through the traumatic effects of being bullied. Keeping a journal or diary is a prodigious way to see your thoughts from a different perspective (The Worsley Centre, n.d.). You could also try getting involved with activities outside work. You would benefit from joining a team or club. You could also participate in yoga or meditation. Do something that makes you happy and brings you joy (Ziv, 2020). Through the assistance of a counsellor or therapist, the victim processes the trauma by putting it into words and emotions to make meaning of it (*Phases*, n.d.). I found counselling to be very therapeutic and comforting.

It can be very difficult to talk to family or friends about your problems. You do not want to monopolize the conversations with your problems. Talking to a trained professional can be more comforting to some people (The Worsley Centre, n.d.). Mindfulness practices include mindful eating, consciousness of breathing, gentle yoga, mindful walking, and open awareness meditation (*Phases*, n.d.). There is no need to feel ashamed or embarrassed to talk about any topic with your counsellor because they are used to talking about taboo topics. There is no judgement from a professional, and it is a safe place to express yourself (The Worsley Centre, n.d.). It is important to seek professional help from a counsellor or therapist who understands trauma (Ziv, 2020). Counselling is a cathartic experience (The Worsley Centre, n.d.). Bottling up things inside is not healthy. Having a place to purge your pent-up emotions releases a weight off your mind and give you an opportunity to start to heal and move forward.

One of my favourite physical aspects to holistic healing is massage therapy. Massage therapy releases tension in your muscles and provides you an opportunity to release emotional baggage. A massage gives a clearer path forward wholeness and health (Osborn, 2011). The music a massage therapist chooses reinforces the intent of lulling the mind: no melody, no loud passages, always changing, no repetition, and interesting but ultimately boring. The stillness of movement gives your mind a quiet state to zone out and relax during a massage. This quiet state is where your mind enters moments before you fall asleep (Osborn, 2011). Massage therapy improves sleep patterns, reduces insomnia related to stress, improves mood, and improves self-esteem (Brothers, 2018). Massage therapy is also 80% covered by most Canadian teachers' benefits plans, and you should take advantage of your paid benefits.

The final phase of healing is creating a new sense of self and a new future, which may involve the spiritual aspect of healing. Trauma does not have to be your life story; it could be a small piece of the puzzle of how you changed and became a stronger person afterwards (*Phases*, n.d.). Exploring our own cultural heritage and practices can make an important contribution to recovery and well-being. They also have healing qualities in that they help us to make connections within ourselves, to feel a sense of belonging, and to strengthen a sense of identity and purpose. You can borrow from other traditions if you find comfort and meaning in them. Being curious and exploring yourself are important component of being healthy and living well. Some examples of cultural healing practices are sharing circles, smudging ceremonies, yoga classes, and praying (*Phases*, n.d.). In the third stage of recovery from trauma, the victim recognizes the impact of the trauma but is ready to take steps towards empowerment and self-determined living (*Phases*, n.d.). Trying something new and different is a learning process and, as teachers, we understand that we are lifelong learners.

Spiritually taking care of my mind has been the most difficult for me to accomplish. After experiencing the trauma of being bullied, there is a sense of helplessness, isolation, and the loss of power and control. Trauma recovery focuses on the restoration of safety and empowerment. Being recovered does not necessarily mean freedom from post-traumatic affects, but in general the ability to live in the present without having overwhelming feelings or thoughts from the past (*Phases*, n.d.). The

smallest triggers can bring you right back to a bullying incident and set you back months of the work you put into healing through therapy. You need to face those feelings, be aware of the triggers, and be prepared to manage your emotions when they occur. Our ability to be compassionate to others depends on our ability to be compassionate to ourselves (*Phases*, n.d.). Self-compassion is being warm and understanding to ourselves when we feel inadequate, fail, or suffer instead of ignoring our pain and being self-critical. Being spiritually connected can help you become more compassionate to yourself and others.

In Buddhist tradition, the chatter that often goes on in a person's internal dialogue while we undertake our everyday lives is considered "monkey mind." It is described like a monkey jumping from limb to limb, similarly how to our brains jump from thought to thought without a singular focus. Calming the monkey mind has a profound effect on our mental well-being (Osborn, 2011). Personally, I experience "monkey mind" often. I realize that I must find time to quiet my mind to regain focus and feel better overall.

Although there are many ways to solve the problem of bullying, taking a holistic approach to healing entrusts the victim to heal as a person. Teaching is a demanding profession, and many teachers fail to find the balance between work and home, and between the positive and negative influences we face daily. When you take care of yourself physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, you can move forward and start to grow as an individual and as a professional.

Conclusion

There are a variety of ways to heal from the trauma of being a victim of bullying. I prefer the holistic approach. I feel empowered to have control over how I take care of myself emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Despite being a victim of teacher-on-teacher bullying, I will not allow it to define who I am. I may have changed because of the trauma I sustained; I feel the change will make me a stronger person in the future. As teachers, we must be role models and demonstrate to our children how to take care of ourselves so we can take care of others. Through the exploration of self and workplace bullying, I continue to learn as an educator, mother, and friend, and overall I am becoming a stronger human being.

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About the Author

Candice Taylor is a middle years' teacher in rural Manitoba, Canada. She is in her ninth year of teaching and is working toward her M. Ed. with a focus on educational administration through BU. Candice loves to travel and spend time with her children and friends.