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### THE ABUSIVE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL: A SOUTH AFRICAN CASE STUDY

#### Abstract

Since the 1990s there has been increased public interest, debate and research on workplace bullying. Little research has, however, been done on the abuse of educators or on the bullies per se. The aim of this paper is to expand the body of knowledge on workplace bullying by shedding light on the character of a bullying school principal. In 2008 I conducted in-depth interviews with educators who were the victims of bullying. A content analysis of the verbatim responses of three educators who worked at the same school revealed that their bully was an envious, destructive narcissistic, evil and unsupportive school principal, who relentlessly victimised them for nearly two decades.

#### Introduction

Initial studies on workplace bullying began in Sweden in the 1990s under the guidance of Leymann. Since then, workplace bullying has generated increased public interest, debate and research (Cemalogly, 2007; Blasé & Blasé, 2004). Researchers (Harvey, Buckley, Teames, Zinko, Brouer & Ferris, 2007; Rayner, Hoel & Cooper, 2002) have identified managers as foremost among the perpetrators of workplace bullying. Workplace bullying is a serious problem in the teaching sector (Peyton, 2009; Blasé & Blasé, 2004; Rayner, Hoel & Cooper, 2002). Little research has, however, been done on the abuse of educators (Blasé & Blasé, 2004) or on the bullies per se (Rayner et al., 2002). The aim of this study is thus to address the aforementioned gaps in the body of knowledge on workplace bullying by answering the following question: Who is the bullying school principal?

#### What is workplace bullying?

There is no clear consensus on what constitutes workplace bullying. Definitions on workplace bullying usually share the following elements: the negative effect of the bullying on the victim; the persistency of the bullying behaviour; and the power disparity between the victim and the bully/bullies (Harvey et al., 2007; Einarsen, 1999). Hadikin and O'Driscoll (2002) find that the commonest forms of workplace bullying behaviour to be intimidation, the undervaluing of skills and humiliation. Other forms include the belittling of work, undervaluing effort, questioning of professional competence, threats, blocking development/promotion, overruling decisions, moving goal posts, refusing reasonable requests, social isolation or silent treatment, rumours, attacking the victim's private life or attitudes, excessive criticism or the monitoring of work, withholding information or depriving of responsibility and verbal aggression (Peyton, 2009; Harvey et al., 2007; Hadikin & O'Driscoll, 2002). Acts of physical violence, such as hitting, slapping and shoving tend to be rare in workplace bullying (Einarsen, 1999).

In her study on the bullying behaviour of school principals, De Wet (2010) identified the following forms of principal-on-educator bullying: Principals ignore educators' thoughts, needs, feelings and accomplishments. Abusive principals

frequently fail to support educators in confrontations with problematic learners, colleagues, learning facilitators, parents or members of the community. Bullying principals verbally abuse and ridicule educators in private and/or in front of colleagues. Educators are subjected to unwarranted and unfair criticism. Principals set their victims up to fail by withholding information or 'creating situations' in the hope that their victims will fail and thus appear incompetent. Educators perceive their bullying principals as being devoid of any empathy towards them. Educators are subjected to unwarranted written reprimands. Principals force educators out of their jobs, reassign them and/or threaten them with instant dismissal

Blasé and Blasé's (2004) comprehensive study on bullying school principals discuss three levels of principal-on-educator bullying:

- *Level 1: Indirect and moderately aggressive behaviour.* Indirect forms of bullying include discounting educators' thoughts, needs and feelings; isolating and abandoning educators; withholding resources and denying opportunities, and credit to educators; favouring 'select' educators; and offensive personal conduct.
- *Level 2: Direct and escalating aggression.* Level 2 behaviour include spying, sabotaging, stealing, destroying educators' instructional material, making unreasonable work demands; and unfair and harsh private and public criticism of educators' work and abilities.
- *Level 3: Direct and severe aggression.* Most level 3 forms of principal mistreatment can be associated with various forms of deception including lying, explosive behaviour, threats, unwarranted reprimands, unfair evaluations, forcing educators out of their jobs' preventing educators from leaving/advancing, sexual harassment and racism.

Research findings that there is an increase in bullying behaviour in facilities that are restructuring, downsizing, where job security is low and where there is internal competition in the facility (Yildirm & Yildirm, 2007) is *mutatis mutandis* applicable on the post-Apartheid education scene, especially for schools serving only white learners during the Apartheid era in South Africa. Schools serving only white learners during the Apartheid era had to downsize and thousands of white educators were retrenched. There were furthermore large cuts in government grants to schools in more affluent areas.<sup>1</sup> The predominantly autocratic management style of school principals furthermore enhances the likelihood of principal-on-educator bullying (Blasé & Blasé, 2004).

### Empirical investigation

The topic discussed in this paper is very sensitive. I therefore employed snowball sampling (Patton, 2002) requiring educators and colleagues to recommend educators whom they believe to have experienced workplace bullying. I contacted the educators who expressed an interest in participation beforehand, explained the study, provided them with a tentative interview schedule and addressed their concerns. As expected, educators were afraid of possible disclosure. However,

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<sup>1</sup> This paper focuses on the experiences of three educators who taught at Secondary School Edumela (pseudonym). This school is located in an affluent area, and served only white learners during the Apartheid era.

several safeguards seemed to alleviate most of the participants' possible fears and promoted trust. I explained to the educators the ethical principles that guided the study; namely, the confidentiality of the findings and the protection of their identities (Maree & Van der Westhuizen, 2007). Three educators who were referred to me by colleagues as possible interviewees were not willing to grant me interviews. All of them cited fear of being identified and the consequent intimidation and/or victimisation as reasons for their refusal. Despite the sensitivity of the topic, mutual trust and rapport were established between the interviewees and me (Patton, 2002). They spoke freely and in detail about their abusive experiences. This may, according to Patton (2002) firstly be attributed to the interviewer's sincere respect, empathy and interest in the people being interviewed. I asked meaningful questions and listened attentively to their answers. Secondly, the study held special significance for educators who participated. As painful as some of the interviews were, the participants believed that that problem of workplace bullying should be made public. The interviews were conducted in the safety of the participants' homes, or if they preferred, in the home of a friend. This added to their sense of comfort, security and trust. Interviews were conducted until definite categories and themes became evident and the information became saturated. In total, 10 educators participated in the study over a 6-month period during 2008. This paper will focus on the narratives of two of the male (David and Harold) and one of the female (Martha) interviewees. All three of them were teaching at the school, namely Secondary School Edumela (pseudonyms).

Data collection was by means of in-depth personal interviews. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Reflective field notes were taken for the sake of triangulation (cf. Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2011; Patton, 2002). The following questions guided the interviews:

- What is your experience of workplace bullying?
- What do you think are the reasons for the bullying?
- What is the impact of workplace bullying on your professional and/or private life?

Henning et al.'s (2011) guidelines for qualitative content analysis were used to reduce, condense and group the content of the participants' answers to the open questions. The identification of emergent themes allowed the information to be analysed and related to the literature.

## **Findings and discussion**

### ***Introduction***

When Mr Somerset was appointed as the deputy principal at the Secondary School Edumela during the 1990s, David and Harold did not, according to the latter, "really take any notice of him". According to Harold, Somerset "always held it against us and treated us unnecessarily badly". Relations between David, Harold and Somerset went into a downward spiral after Somerset's appointment as principal. Martha's life as an educator also changed after the appointment of Somerset. According to her, relations between them were tense right from the start: "I was always blamed for everything that went wrong. He never liked me". The situation became worse when she returned from a year's study leave. Since then, he has done

everything in his power to humiliate her, to bring her into discredit with the parents and colleagues and to break her spirit.

The ensuing characterisation of the bullying principal is based on information extracted from my interviews with David, Harold and Martha. The aim of the paper is not to give an objective factually correct portrayal of the management style of the principal, but to look at him through the eyes of his victims.

### ***Characteristics of the bullying principal***

An analysis of the verbatim responses of the three participants revealed that their bully was an envious, destructive, narcissistic, evil and unsupportive school principal who relentlessly victimised them. In the discussion of the findings of my study I will link the results with the work of other researchers.

#### ***Envy***

Several researchers (Peyton, 2009; Cemalogly, 2007; Kirsten, Viljoen & Rossouw, 2005; Einarsen, 1999) share the view that abusers often feel threatened. They bully those they feel may have 'an edge' over them. Personal strength and accomplishments may thus provoke bullies. Harvey et al.'s (2007) view, that the bully will publicly devalue what he/she envies, while privately coveting the attribute, is aptly illustrated in the following quotation:

*My pupils ... received national and provincial awards. ...he has not accomplished anything of that magnitude ... I don't think he can handle it ... I think he is glad when my children don't perform well, then nobody will make a fuss of my work (Martha).*

The prestige that Martha enjoyed amongst her colleagues was a thorn in Somerset's side. For example, she learned that he had tampered with the results of the School Governing Body's (SGB) election in which she stood as an educator representative. He also endeavoured to damage her image amongst the parents and children. For instance, the extramural programme timetables were regularly changed to the detriment of the activities in which she was involved.

Somerset's tactic to repeatedly assign learning areas to her of which she had little or no knowledge, in the hope that she would fail, is seen by Peyton (2009) as a strategy bullies use to victimise those whom they envy out of their job. As part of her survival strategy Martha thoroughly familiarised herself with the new educational approach (Outcomes Based Education). Her hard work did not meet with his approval. On the contrary: "He criticised my way of marking" and "I had to appear on the carpet in order to explain why I had re-assessed my pupils. But this is part of the OBE assessment policy." Martha's view that Somerset picked on her is not uncommon behaviour for workplace bullies. Peyton (2009, p. 42) writes, for example, that bullies have "their special victims".

#### ***Destructive narcissism***

Harvey et al.'s (2007) and Kirsten et al.'s (2005) findings that the workplace bully may suffer from destructive narcissism, is to a large extent, confirmed by this study. The subsequent discussion will highlight the principal's inflated sense of self-importance, arrogance, preoccupation with power and entitlement; his inability to handle criticism and a lack of concern for and a devaluation of others.

Research findings (e.g., Peyton, 2009; Harvey et al., 2007; Kirsten et al., 2005; Blasé & Blasé, 2002) that the workplace bully is unwilling to endure any opposition

or criticism, is extremely authoritarian showing a preoccupation with power, are confirmed by this study. The three educators mentioned for example, that those who dare to speak out against Somerset must bear the brunt of his anger (“We heard him shouting at her. ... she must do as ordered or hand in her resignation” and “I cannot confront him. He tells you to your face that you are lying, while he is the one who is lying”). David furthermore described how Somerset threatened him with dismissal. Sometimes Somerset perceived a simple request as criticism. Martha invited him (in front of colleagues) to attend the year-end prize-giving function for the extramural activity for which she was responsible. When he turned down her invitation she said: “Sir, the children would really appreciate your presence and support”. The next day she was severely reproached and threatened with an official reprimand for “humiliating him in public”. Peyton (2009) notes that the self-righteous bully cannot accept that they can possibly be in the wrong. Bullies are furthermore able to, as is illustrated by Somerset’s confrontation with Martha about her alleged public humiliation of him, misrepresent facts and twist what people say (Peyton, 2009).

The three educators suggested that staff members, who did not show absolute loyalty towards the principal, were bullied. David gave the following rationalisation for his bullying:

*When he was appointed as deputy head ... he was not welcomed with open arms ...and it seems as if he is still holding it against us.*

Martha, who described in detail how Somerset tried to get rid of her and four of her colleagues, said that the bullying principal believed that their loyalty lay with the previous principal:

*He wanted to fire [us]. We all worked under Mr. M. He started to target and terrorise each one of us.*

#### ***Evil***

Martha’s suggestion that her bully is dishonest (he rigged the results of the SGB election), unfair (e.g. the promotion of a ‘favoured’ educator as HOD) and manipulative (“if we are not willing to do as we are told, we must look for other jobs”) is in line with findings by Peyton (2009) and Harvey et al. (2007); namely, that bullies act without remorse to the detriment of their victims. The participants furthermore used words and phrases such as the following to describe their bully: “untouchable”; “a hard man” and “doesn’t give a damn for other people”. David said Somerset once compared a “good principal” with high quality sausage (*boerewors*). This principal implied that a successful/good educational leader should, among other things, demonstrate the characteristics of a pig. According to David, the principal’s deeds often exemplified his motto. David’s depiction of his principal as a person devoid of empathy and compassion links with Peyton’s (2009) portrayal of the bully as a person who picks on the vulnerable. According to Peyton (2009, p. 41), bullies take great pleasure in seeing their “victims suffer from being afraid of them”. David’s health gradually deteriorated and he was diagnosed with depression. The principal’s unsympathetic attitude during his illness remains with David:

*He told me that if I were not yet ready at the beginning of the term and if I could not yet teach fulltime I ... would not be the first person to resign on account of depression, but I had to start thinking of leaving teaching. He said that if I could not cope, I had to go. ... He could have given me a fair chance to get onto my feet again.*

The next term, David resumed his duties at the school, despite the fact that he was still officially on sick leave. After this incident, the relations between David and Somerset deteriorated further and he was regularly “on the carpet” for apparent trivialities. He was, for example, belittled for not comprehending a complex rubric. Peyton (2009, p. 39) writes that workplace bullies “neither know nor care about the impact of their behaviour on others”. According to Peyton (2009) it is not uncommon for abusive managers to manage their staff by humiliation. Harvey et al. (2007, p. 122) note that the bullies seem to ‘enjoy’ the fear and pain they inflict on others.

#### ***Unsupportive leader***

All three participants found Somerset unsupportive. Both David and Harold acknowledged during the interviews that they were struggling disciplining misbehaving learners. Their requests for support were turned down and even mocked by Somerset. Both of them were later on formally reprimanded for using “improper” disciplinary strategies. The use of formal structures to assert power over the victim is not an uncommon occurrence in workplace bullying (Peyton, 2009). David, furthermore, experienced Somerset’s negative conduct during his illness and David’s inability to comprehend a rubric, as a lack of support. Martha believed that Somerset’s unwillingness to utilise her in her field of expertise and adhere to her request that he should attend the extracurricular activities that she is responsible for, as a lack of support. Peyton (2009, p. 42) is of the opinion that bullies deliberately withhold support so that he/she can later on accuse the victim of “getting it wrong”.

#### ***Bullies are persistent and focused individuals***

A key characteristic of bullying is that the negative behaviour is persistent (Harvey et al., 2007; Hadikin & O’Driscoll, 2002; Einarsen, 1999). All three participants endured Somerset’s relentless bullying since his appointment as principal during the 1990s. When Martha informed her deputy principal about her principal’s bullying, his answer was: “You will never change that man”. She also had the following to say about her tormentor:

*If he doesn’t like you ... he’ll target you ... he is persistent; he goes on and on and on ... it doesn’t matter how hard you try ... he’ll continue prying until he finds fault.*

Somerset is portrayed as a focused, task orientated individual who was fully aware of what he was doing (Martha described in detail how her bully systematically tried to get rid of her for nearly two decades by, amongst other things, discontinuing her area of specialisation, issuing her with official reprimands for minor wrongdoings and humiliating her in public).

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At the conclusion of each interview I asked the interviewees whether or not they had confronted their tormentor. Their answers to this question are indicative of the negative effect of bullying on victims. All three the participants decided not to confront Somerset. Martha said for example “No, I can’t confront him ... he will tell me to my face that I’m lying ... he is that type of person”. David, who was forced to resume his teaching responsibilities whilst he was still on sick leave, said: “my doctor was very angry; I could possibly have taken him (Somerset) to the labour court, but I’m not that type of guy”. The South African Council of Educators (2002),

as well as the leading teachers' trade unions in South Africa (cf. Heystek, 2001), set out to create a work environment where dignity and respect are afforded to all educators. The SACE and the teachers' trade unions also undertake to tackle incidents that violate educators' rights speedily and effectively. However, the three interviewees decided not to confront their tormentor or turn to official organs to protect them against their bullying principal. It therefore seems as if a "spiral of silence" (Harvey et al., 2007, p. 125) overwhelmed the school. The victims were too afraid to speak out or to ask for help.

Despite the severity of the bullying the three interviewees had to suffer, none of them considered leaving the teaching profession. David and Harold mentioned that they had only two or three years before they retired. Martha, who had been teaching at the same school for 30 years, said that she had unsuccessfully applied for teaching position at other schools and for a position as learning facilitator.

Two years after my interview with David, he retired at the age of 60. The once beloved, dedicated educator concedes that he is apathetic towards the school where he had worked for his entire professional career. Martha has, at long last, been promoted to the position of HOD. Harold plans to retire when he turns 65 during 2013. Somerset will retire in December 2012.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to shed light on the character of a bullying school principal. A content analysis of the verbatim responses of three educators who worked at the same school revealed that their bully was an envious, destructive, narcissistic, evil and unsupportive school principal who relentlessly victimised them. This study has given me insight into the character of the bully from the perspective of the victims. This is not uncommon in workplace bullying research. Rayner et al. (2002) correctly recommend that researchers should cast their net wider to include information from the bully's point of view. This case study gave a single description of an individual as seen through the eyes of three of his members of staff. The information should therefore not be used to "profile" a school principal who bullies (some of) his members of staff.

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