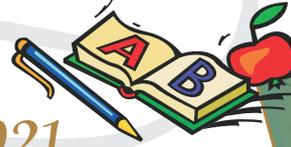


Quality Education News

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Dear Supporter of Quality Education

Teachers bullying teachers

When school bullying is in the media, the focus usually is on the learners. The bullying is about the learners but seldom about their teachers. Hardly any mention is made of another group that gets bullied – the teachers. Worldwide, the level of bullying amongst staff, is staggering.

In 2018 Elizabeth Mollema did a Master's degree at the University of Pretoria in which she researched teachers' experiences of bullying. In the United Kingdom, 67% of teachers either witnessed bullying or themselves were bullied over a period of twelve months. The United States of America figure was almost 50% (Mollema: 26). Two other researchers found that in South Africa almost 90% of survey participants were bullied over a period of twelve months (De Wet and Jacobs cited by Mollema: 26).

Teachers bullying teachers is a universal unpleasant reality. Sadly – in comparison to the thousands of studies done on bullying amongst learners – there's far less research on teachers being bullied or bullying their colleagues. Much more research is needed. The more that teacher bullying is ignored, the more likely that it will grow.

What is teacher bullying? It's important to realise that bullying is different from the odd conflict that a teacher might have with a colleague over an issue. Nor is it to be seen as bullying when a teacher has moments of anger or unpleasantness. For behavior to be described as teacher-on-teacher bullying it will (Mulvahill 2020: 2):

“... follow an abusive, repetitive pattern and can include behaviors such as ridicule, exclusion, shaming and aggression. Bullying ... can be verbal or physical.”

Bullying takes many forms. Ten major ways in which 541 teachers were bullied according to a British survey were (Times Educational Supplement 2008: 13-14):

- 1 Unmanageable workload
- 2 Opinions ignored in meetings
- 3 Feeling excluded from the group
- 4 Information needed to do work properly is withheld
- 5 Hostile reaction when approaching another staff member

6 Persistent criticism of ideas and work

7 Repeated reminders of errors

8 Humiliated or ridiculed privately or in public

9 Excessive monitoring of professional performance

10 Given work below one's level of competence.

All of these types of bullying are also found in South African schools. Other forms of bullying include the following (www.bullyonline.org):

- Spreading rumours or gossip about a person
- Removing areas of responsibility without a reasonable explanation
- Giving a person an impossible deadline to complete a task
- Blocking applications for leave, promotion or attending a training course
- Undermining or deliberately impeding a person's work.



Then there are those teachers who are subjected to **regulation bullying**. Those teachers are forced to unquestioningly obey regulations and rules enforced by authority figures within the school. Teachers aren't allowed to use their initiative even when they can see better alternatives. Bullies often resort to **legal bullying** if their demands aren't met. They threaten taking action such as charging the teachers for insubordination or giving written warnings.

When a school doesn't take decisive action bullying behaviour, the negative results are huge. For the teacher, emotional trauma sets in. Mental breakdown as well as physical ill-health could also follow. For the school, Quality Education becomes an impossibility. Teachers are unhappy. The quality of their teaching goes down; absenteeism goes up. Interactions with their colleagues as well as with the learners deteriorate.

Every teacher in a Quality school strives to contribute towards creating a happy work environment for others. When the school is bully-free, everyone's given a chance to thrive and be happy.

Sincerely

Richard Hayward

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Why do teachers get bullied?

“Power is clearly linked to position and rank. But to a certain degree it has to be earned. You can give orders to your subordinates but you get more out of them if you obtain their willing cooperation rather than their grudging submission.”

Neil Flanagan



Anyone entrusted with power will abuse it if not also animated with the love of truth and virtue, no matter whether he be a prince, or one of the people.

(Jean de La Fontaine)

A school principal is in a position of power. That person has the legal authority to give legitimate instructions and expect them to be obeyed. Furthermore, if they are deliberately disobeyed or ignored, disciplinary action can be taken.

Sadly, power goes to the head of certain principals and senior management teams. They enjoy lording it over others. Their style of leadership is autocratic with a mind frame of, “Unquestioningly do it my way or else ...”

Leadership requires a nuanced approach on using one's legitimate power. In a quality school one is given power to influence and lead others for the overall betterment of the institution. There are times when decisive leadership is needed. Then there are also those times when the formal leadership (that is, the senior management team), steps back. Let others lead or let individuals lead themselves.

Abraham Lincoln, often regarded as the greatest President of the United States of America, was a humble selfless leader. Of the use of power, he wrote:

“Nearly all men can stand adversity but if you want to test a man's character, give him power.”

Abusive power-hungry school leaders like to give themselves trappings of power. Often their offices reflect luxurious furnishings in stark contrast to the physical appearance of the staffroom. When they walk into the staffroom, there are reserved seats for them to sit on. Even in the staff car park, there is reserved parking available for the elite few.



Such minor abuses of power could open the floodgates for the abuse of staff members who are in lower level posts in the school. A first-year teacher or teacher on Post level 1 might be too scared to do anything other than precisely what is demanded by the arrogant powerful leader.

Another reason why teachers get bullied by fellow teachers is the organisational climate of the school. Every school has its' unique 'vibe' or 'feel'. That's organisational climate. The climate in one school could be open and transparent. Staff meetings are seen as opportunities for lively discussions on the challenges and issues of the day. Knowledge, skills and wisdom are not only to be found in the heads of the senior management team. Everyone's welcome to make input; everyone's actively encouraged to be part of the team.

A transparent school climate means that there are no hidden agendas. Decisions taken are open to scrutiny. There's a vigilance by everyone to ensure that there's no favouritism nor victimisation. An example would be the appointment of a Deputy Principal. Questions are asked as to whether the process is correct and the appointment made on the basis of fairness and meritocracy. In such a climate, bullying behaviour such as making an appointment on any criteria other than professional ability and values are exposed.



A third reason for teachers being bullied could be their own characters. Teachers need to learn how to manage the staff bully. If they have submissive personalities and don't stand up for their rights, they could be 'walked over'.

When a person has a low personal self-esteem, they could adopt an attitude of, 'learnt helplessness and acceptance of their victimisation.' De Wet 2014a: 6).

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Someone's trying to bully you. What now?

"Never be bullied into silence. Never allow yourself to be made a victim. Accept no one's definition of your life but define yourself."

Harvey S Firestone



Harry Firestone's quote is a reminder that we should not allow ourselves to get into 'victim' mode. We should not allow ourselves to get into a passive acceptance of what a bully might try to dish out to others.

We would expect that teachers try hard to create a happy and peaceful school environment for everyone. The reality is different. Bullies are found in every place of work. Learn to manage them or school days can become unbearable.

Ten tips on what to do if you feel you are being bullied are:

1. Control your emotions

A bully enjoys making you angry with their cutting, sarcastic comments and rude remarks. The person wants you to 'rise to the bait'. When you reply in a similar manner, they're relishing the chance to heat the emotional temperature. Keep calm. You might need to count slowly to ten ... and slowly back again! If possible, try to walk away from the scene. Remind yourself: This too will pass.

2. Keep the work relationship correct

The bully might be someone that you need to interact with every day. Focus on what you need to do in your work environment. Don't give them the opportunities to find fault because the work wasn't done correctly or done in a shoddy manner. Give to Caesar what is due to Caesar.

Be courteous. Even when the person is rude, reply politely. As the simple proverb states: The soft answer turns away wrath.

3. Distance yourself

Elizabeth Mulvahill (2020:2) makes the succinct point: "Don't feed the beast." Steer clear of the animal. Why be part of a conversation or discussion where the bully could suddenly turn on you? Sit amongst supportive colleagues and friends in the staffroom. Without being rude, keep a healthy distance from the person.

4. Keep your distaste to yourself

You might be one of many being bullied by someone. The temptation is to gossip. Beware. Gossipers invariably find that their words get back to the bully. That further inflames the bully and pours petrol on what might have started out as a single spark.

5. Talk to a confidant

When you're bullied, it's unreasonable to expect that you keep all your emotions and feelings boiling within yourself. Inner anger, distress, humiliation and a string of other negative thoughts can mentally unhinge you. There's a need to find a confidant that will be an empathic listener.

Simply by talking to someone else, two things are likely to happen. Perspective is gained. You don't allow the bully to become an overwhelming obsession in one's mind. Life has countless other issues of far more interest. Also, by sharing your thoughts, you could be able to share strategies on managing the bully.

6. Ask yourself the difficult question

You might need to ask yourself the hard question: "Am I the difficult one?"

We all have biases and prejudices ... no matter how hard we might try to not let it show! Do factors such as a person's culture, education, home language, political affiliation or sexual orientation affect the way that we treat them? If our attitudes are negative – no matter how hard we try to hide them – a cue response can be that of being bullied.

7. Consider giving feedback

If you use this strategy, use it with great caution. You might find it a sensible approach to have a one-on-one discussion. Surprise, surprise. The person who is seen as bully might come to realise that unintentionally, their way of expressing themselves or body language comes over as that of a bully.

8. Record instances

There are those bullies who – no matter how much you may try to cooperate with them and understand their behaviour – continue their unacceptable behaviour. Record bullying incidents including dates, times and, if possible, witnesses. These will be needed should there be legal and regulation action.

9. Speak to senior staff

An unbridled bully needs reining in. If the bully does not change behaviour, there's need for intervention at senior management level. A senior staff member can play the role of facilitator in reducing bullying behaviour amongst staff. A need for staff development programmes could be identified. One example would be to have an assertiveness training programme; another could be an anger management workshop. Sanctions such as verbal and written warnings may be given to bullies.

10. Contact your teacher union or education department

Should bullying continue unabated, the victim should contact their teacher union or the local education department. When this done, the complaint against the bully is formalised. Labour Law includes legislation that protects any worker from being bullied. Sanctions can include mandatory attendance at courses, suspensions and dismissals.

In extreme cases, the bullied person can lay a criminal charge at a police station.

The bully needs to know that there's legislation that protects the teacher from being bullied. When that protection is denied, the law is on the side of the teacher. No teacher should ever accept that it's OK to uncomplainingly endure bullying.

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Bullying and the senior management team

The senior management team (SMT) has a huge impact on the level of bullying seen in a school. The team drives the anti-bullying policy for learners and the staff. If the team takes this role seriously, it bodes well for everyone. Amongst the learners, there's an awareness of a 'zero-tolerance' attitude against bullying. The teachers notice the SMT taking decisive action whenever it's needed. The staff sense that the SMT cares for their mental well-being.

In change management theory, there's the 'Iron Law' concept. It's premise is simple. If you want to bring about change and improvement, the starting point is the top of the organisation. When there's commitment from the leader, successful outcomes are likely to follow.

Bullying happens in every school. In some schools it's rife. Often there's physical violence too. Nearly everyone unquestioningly seems to accept it as part of school life. Learn to take it on the chin. In other schools, there's an acknowledgement that bullying does happen. Yet those schools also know that much can be done to stamp it out. The whole school becomes part of the anti-bullying action. Bullying is reduced to a minimum. Physical violence is virtually non-existent.

In leading the school towards a bully-free organisational climate, the SMT would discuss these type of staff-level questions:

- Are complaints of bullying dealt with decisively, impartially and promptly?
- Does the school have a specific 'Staff anti-bullying policy'?
- If there is staff favouritism, how is it countered?
- Is there a clearly-delineated process to follow if someone is bullied?
- What is done to ensure a fair workload for all staff members?
- When making staff appointments, what's done to avoid biases and prejudices?

Although the SMT is centre-stage in creating a bully-free staff environment, everyone else has a part to play. Mutual respect is shown without regard to factors including a colleague's culture, race, religion or sexual orientation. Gossip and rumour-mongering are out. Friendliness, helpfulness and professional cooperation are in.

To help create such a cooperative organisational climate, the SMT can initiate social functions. Braais, celebration teas, lunches and

parties are examples. Encourage staff to give ideas. A reality is that the more the staff interact, it's easier for folk to get to know each other better. The one-liner might seem corny but it's true, "A stranger is a friend that you do not know." Friends don't bully each other.

Isolated incidents of bullying will still happen in the best of schools. Yet Quality-principled schools are happy places. They are place where everyone abides by a simple principle ... bullying is out.



SACE

South African Council for Educators

Towards Excellence in Education

Workshops on bullying

Recently, a number of horrific incidents of violent physical bullying have been highlighted in the South African media. The Department of Basic Education intends to give special focus on all forms of bullying and ways to reduce them in schools.

SAQI (South African Quality Institute) has a number of programmes that are accredited by SACE. The activities earn CPTD points. Two of their programmes that deal with bullying are:

- ♦ **Conflicts occur in every school – let's resolve them!**
- ♦ **Is there a bully on your staff?**

These workshops and others are facilitated by Dr Richard Hayward. He has been a principal of two public schools and in education leadership positions for decades. More details are available on either 011 888 3262 or rpdayward@yahoo.com | Poor schools are sponsored.