Workplace Bullying of K-12 Educators: Mental Health Services and Policy Considerations

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ABSTRACT: Bullying behaviors in the workplace are marked by repeated events of intimidation that create a pattern of humiliation and fear in the victim. School staff in K-12 schools are not immune to bullying behavior by other adults in the organization. Educators experience personal and professional repercussions when confronted with bullying experiences by other educators or educational administrators. This qualitative study demonstrates the breadth of the issue and emphasizes the roles of a school psychologist, school social worker, and human resource personnel in the wake of the potential ethical challenges that present when a staff member reports they are being bullied. Additionally, other involvement remedies include responsible contributions toward incorporation of policies and mental health innovations that will address the adult population in a school or district.

KEYWORDS: Workplace bullying, teachers, school administration, mental health, policy

1 INTRODUCTION

The topic of bullying is a prevalent and universal phenomenon in society reaching beyond the typical childhood playground and into the academic workplace (Aleem 2016; King and Piotrowski 2015). Bullying leads to emotional and mental distress resulting in depression, low self-esteem, poor work performance and, in some cases, suicide (Boudrias et al. 2020; de Wet 2019; Hollis 2017). Bullying by educator-on-educator or leadership-on-educator creates an environment of hostility, uncertainty, and fear. The effects of bullying behavior in the workplace among adults have not been extensively researched specifically in the education profession. Attention is turning to incivility among staff and administrators (DeCieri et al. 2018; King and Piotrowski 2015; Klein 2005; Williams 2017). The National School Boards Association reported that 46 percent of respondents to a survey in an Illinois school district reported to have been the victims of bullying while 64 percent reported having seen adult bullying (Healy 2016). The problem of bullying creates long-term consequences for the targeted persons as well as the non-bullied witnesses of the victims (Lutgen-Sandvik 2006). Residual effects include decreased professional and personal motivation, emotional turmoil, work absences, and job dissatisfaction (Lutgen-Sandvik et al. 2016).

Researchers have used a variety of definitions in describing workplace bullying (Boudrias et al. 2020; Chirila and Constantin 2013; de Wet 2019). Bullying in the workplace was described as early as 1996 in a study conducted in Norway (Einarsen and Skogstad 1996) that found extensive bullying by coworkers and administrators across many professions. Lutgen-Sandvik et al. (2016) described bullying behavior as a "constellation of hostile messages and abusive behaviors persistently targeted at one or more persons in work settings" (p. 31). The authors further delineated workplace bullying behaviors as escalating in intensity, such as going from a subtle remark to rude and frequent comments that humiliate. DeCieri et al. (2018), de Wet (2019), and Pilch and Turska (2014) added that the repeated actions are unwanted by the victim and cause stressors such as humiliation ultimately interfering with job performance. Workplace bullying is not a one-time event but rather a gradually evolving process over time. Nielsen et al. (2012) explained that bullying occurs over timeframe in which the victim perceives himself or herself "on the receiving end of negative actions from one or several persons, and where the target of the bullying finds it difficult to defend against these actions" (p.38). The aggressive behaviors may include physical or verbal badgering, insulting remarks, and intense pressure. The frequency of the bullying behaviors, the intentions of the adult workplace bully, and the perceived misuse of power between the bully and the target of the bullying, the victim's reaction, and the victim's inability to adequately defend himself or herself as a part of the definition.

Although the literature included several definitions for workplace bullying, there are common denominators that resonate in each of the definitions. The frequency of the bullying behaviors, the duration and escalation, the intentions of the adult workplace bully, and the perceived misuse of power between the bully and the target of the bullying, the victim's reaction, and the victim's inability to adequately defend themselves is a part of the definition (DeCieri et al. 2018; de Wet 2019; Lutgen-Sandvik

2005). The last common feature of the definitions is that the victim of the bullying eventually becomes unable to defend themselves.

2 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

The effects of bullying on children in schools has been widely studied (Wolke and Lereya 2015); however, less is known about the effects of bullying on professional educators and if bullying of staff by other staff or staff by school leadership in the educational setting is an issue or prevalent in educational settings. Organizational behavioral studies have indicated that bullying within organizations is problematic (Boudrias et al. 2020; Lutgen-Sandvik and Tracy, 2012). A stratified random sample survey of 1,008 adult Americans conducted in 2017 indicated that 61% of workplace bullies are the directors, managers, or chief officers; 40% of the bullied suffer adverse health effects; 19% of Americans are bullied; and another 19% witness the bullying (Namie, 2017).

There is currently no federal law that prohibits bullying in the workplace. Of the western democratic countries, the United States is the last country to ratify a federal law regarding workplace bullying ("Healthy Workplace Bill" 2018). In the United States, currently no state has a ratified law to create a healthy workplace preventing bullying. Twenty-one states and one territory have not even introduced such a bill. Twenty-nine states and two territories have introduced bills, but they have not been approved ("Healthy Workplace Bill" 2018).

The National Education Association has led the way in research of bullying in the education workplace. A survey of medium-sized school district employees found that 25 percent reported being bullied (Long 2012). Long (2012) cited one teacher who was bullied by the principal and superintendent until her health began to deteriorate and she left her job. Another participant described how the principal caused at least 50 percent of the staff members transferring out of the school each year because of the principal's practice of bullying teachers who did not belong to the union.

The findings of a survey of school boards and superintendents in Illinois showed that 64% of the participants responded that they had witnessed adult bullying of other adults (Healy 2016). Additionally, 46% of the survey participants had been victims of bullying by school boards and/or superintendents. Other findings indicated that five percent of school board members and superintendents admitted bullying another adult in the school district.

When staff members or administrators are bullied, the consequences to the school system can be a reduction in instructional time for students, increased use of sick time or personal time off by staff, and staff members' leaving the school resulting in negative publicity for the school (Giorgi 2012; Hoel et al. 2011; Long 2013). Bullying anxiety and stress related illness may lead to increased requests for workplace disability (Berthelsen et al. 2011; Glambeck et al. 2014; Lemon and Barnes, 2021) because of an inherent fear of returning to the workplace or the perception that their career has been so damaged that they cannot return to work (Glambeck et al. 2014; Lemon and Barnes, 2021). Consequences for the victim may include residual health problems that can be categorized as PTSD such as long-term anxiety, sleep issues, concentration difficulties, depression, and anger (Boudrias et al. 2020; Lutgen-Sandvik 2006; Tracy et al. 2006). When workplace bullying exists in schools, the workplace and the learning environment is impacted negatively (Kleinheksel and Geisel, 2019).

3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Educational institutions are not immune to workplace bullying. Schools and school districts are concerned with escalating types of aggressive and negative behaviors by the academic organization's members who target other members (Lutgen-Sandvik 2003, 2005). Schools are not immune to the power and politics of other organizations (Cavanaugh et al.1981; de Wet 2019). Organizational structure and culture play a significant role in the school settings (Brown 2004; Chen 1993; de Wet 2019). There is a tier of authority and the exercise of power at different levels within school systems. The phenomenon of power affects schools as organizations. This study reviewed the theoretical characteristics of power as it relates to the control of others, as well as organization cultural theory, and the theory of humiliation.

3.1 Organization Cultural Theory

Organizational culture plays a decisive role in shaping the behaviors of an organization. The nature of what organizational culture is and what an adequate definition has been continuously debated. Watkins (2013) presented the topic of organizational culture via LinkedIn and received over 300 responses. The responses centered on several topics including consistency, incentives, a shared description, and view from within organizations, a social control system, and culture as a continuous dynamic. While much about organizational culture has been written and devoted to the business field, the theory and topics are applicable to schools as organizations.

Prior to the 1990's, there was a belief that an organization's structure and ability to function was based on a rational decision-making process in which the organization's leader was pivotal (Nebojsa 2015). In school districts, this leader is the superintendent, who is hired by the school board. Other leaders within the structure of a school district may include administrators such as assistant superintendents, principals, assistant principals, and directors. After the 1990's, a focus on organizational culture

was not on the formal structure but rather on the patterns, decisions, and interactions within the organization (Nebojsa 2015). Patterns develop and are created by the environment. However, when organizations hold to an institutional pattern, the organizations resemble each other. Schools are inherently locations in which there is a specific organizational culture.

Schools are *learning organizations*, a term introduced by Senge (2010). Senge explained the concept as organizational learning. The process includes collective learning where individuals within the organization can collaboratively identify and understand the systemic causes of problems and work to resolve and monitor each problem. Organizational learning encourages a shared vision, and fosters patterns of creative and meaningful thinking, openness, reflection, and deeper conversations which are consistently nurtured. The desired result is to energize change by tackling and resolving problems identified innovatively within the organization innovatively that are relevant and meaningful to all stakeholders. In a school and school district, it becomes essential that all stakeholders remain consistent with the organization's pursuit of a positive cultural environment for all involved in the learning experience (Hoy and Miskel, 2013). Restructuring and changes in the organization's leadership can lead to increased demands on workload and threats to one's job (Farmer 2011). Superintendents, School Board members, and Principals often change.

The underpinning of shared views and values within an organization is based on the organization's vision statement. A vision statement is the foundational objectives and values which drives the internal decision-making and frames the organization's culture (Coleman 2013). The objectives should clearly delineate how colleagues are treated, how they treat one another, and how they treat those that they serve (Coleman 2013). In a school system, the school district's policies are approved by the individual school board. Once the school district's policies are approved, the superintendent of schools expects the execution, implementation, and practice of the guidelines and values to be employed at each of the respective schools within the district.

3.1.1 Social control system

Leadership at all levels in an organization can positively or negatively affect the outcomes of the organization. Power, more specifically, the imbalance of power, is a central component of workplace bullying. Power is a person's intentional ability to influence the behavior, emotions, and beliefs of others to achieve one's own goal (Hill and Leigh-Hunt, 2016). Power does not equate to authority nor is it the same as leadership. Social control has an element of suppression, as social control implies there is a superior person or group who manipulates those under their tutelage (Obryvalina 2013). Researchers (e.g., DeCieri et al. 2018; Einarsen 2005; Lemon and Barnes, 2021; Liefooghe and Davey 2001) have speculated that bullying events may not come from the abuse of power but rather from the use of legitimate authoritarian power to achieve performance objectives. These objectives may be overly ambitious, come too quickly, or one new change on top of another occurs before the first change has had a chance to be studied and data collected. Lemon and Barnes (2021) and Neuman and Baron (2003) postulated that an on-going and long-term relationship exists between the workplace bully and the victim. The bullying may occur openly in the presence of others and the bully feels justified in his or her behavior.

3.1.2 Culture as a continuous dynamic

The concept of culture in an organizational entity is crucial to understanding the values, goals, and philosophies within the day-to-day functioning and overall acceptance of behaviors by the human capital. Two approaches to organizational culture include an authoritarian and task-oriented approach or one that is employee-centered, which will determine how an organization deals with bullying (Bernstein and Trimm 2016). Leadership within an organization sets the example which extends to the climate and culture by modeling the desirable behaviors for employees to emulate. Culture is often led by the industry, such as a masculine culture within the construction industry (Bernstein and Trimm 2016), but the culture within an academic institution is unique with many varying characteristics including a decentralized structure which is conducive to a bullying situation.

The culture of an organization and the acceptance of inappropriate behaviors create an uncomfortable and cruel environment resulting in lowered productivity, disgruntled employees, and high turnover, and absenteeism (Bernstein and Trimm 2016; Boudrias et al. 2020; de Wet 2019). Ineffective leadership is the devastating factor that creates a culture of stress and conflict, disseminating incivility, and strife (Bernstein and Trimm 2016). The culture will continue as determined by the acceptance or aversion of bullying behaviors. Creating a positive and consistent culture requires leadership to understand the dynamics associated with the benefits of a productive and nurturing working environment; thus, developing a new paradigm in the organization's culture.

3.2 Humiliation Theory

Humiliation theory provides a strong conceptual foundation when studying bullying. Elements of fear, powerlessness, feeling threatened, and being treated unjustly have been identified in studies regarding humiliation as either a feeling or a construct. Lindner (2003), who summarized a theory of humiliation, stated that there are four variants of humiliation: conquest, relegation, reinforcement, and exclusion. Conquest humiliation is when a stronger power reduces a lower power. Relegation humiliation is when an individual or group is forcibly pushed into a downward position. Reinforcement humiliation is the routine abuse of inferiors so that the group continues to be inferior. Exclusion humiliation is when an individual is forcefully ejected through a

forcing of the will. Linder found that this last type of humiliation, exclusion humiliation, is a violation of a person's human right to dignity.

The experience of humiliation is as important as the fear of humiliation (Klein 1991, 2005). Klein (2005) contends that the fear of humiliation is a powerful motivator of disturbing behaviors and referred to the patterns of behavior that are associated with the individual experience of humiliation as the "Humiliation Dynamic". The dynamic of humiliation involves three parties. First, there is the humiliator, the person who inflicts the humiliation on another person. Secondly, there is the victim, the person who experiences the humiliation. Lastly, there is the witness or bystander, who is the observer of the humiliation, who may also experience the fear of humiliation by the humiliator.

Elshout et al. (2016) conducted a study of 111 university students to determine the emotions associated with humiliation. Belittling, shame, and loss of self-confidence/self-esteem were listed by more than half of the participants. Specific emotions listed as feelings were shame, anger, sadness, fear, hatred, envy, unhappiness, dismay, disappointment, regret, and guilt. The authors found that humiliation is a personal experience that overlaps with shame. One antecedent to the emotion of humiliation was the person being brought down through belittling, bullying, bad mouthing, social exclusion, and criticism. Participants related feelings of powerlessness, inferiority, and damage to their self-esteem.

Leask (2013) determined that humiliation is a way persons exercise power over others that leads to responses that can be life changing. Leask (2013) suggested that humiliation is "an act of power, demonstratively and unjustly used with apparent impunity" (p. 136). Statman (2010) contended that humiliation takes advantage of a person's need for self-respect and sends messages to the individual that imply subordination, rejection, and seclusion. Hartling and Luchetta (1999), Klein (2005) and Statman (2010) agreed that humiliation is defined when an individual suffers a threat to self-respect and human dignity. Persons who have suffered as targets from bullying may experience these same effects.

4 METHOD

Exploratory phenomenology guided the study's design. The purpose of the research was to interview participants who have had experiences with the phenomenon of workplace bullying by colleagues and staff in school leadership positions and to understand the bullying experience from the narrative insights and perspective of the educator, including how those experiences may have affected them both personally and professionally. The research sought to provide a voice to the educators who had experienced or observed bullying in the workplace. This led us to the following research questions: *RQ1: What are the personal and professional experiences of educators in the K-12 school system as targets of bullying behavior in the workplace? And RQ2:What were the personal and professional repercussions of educators in the K-12 school system who experienced workplace bullying?*

The qualitative method of exploratory phenomenology was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of the participants. The research was not seeking a quantification of data but rather an understanding of the behavior of bullying from the participant's perspective when the behavior occurred in the workplace setting, whether the bullying was experienced or witnessed. A descriptive phenomenological analysis was employed to interpret the interview findings (Lester 1999). Phenomenology suggests that the researcher allows the information to emerge through the interviews (Groenewald 2004).

4.1 Participants

The participants selected for this study comprised educators, including teachers, principals, administrators, and directors. The sample was 46 educators who worked for K-12 educational institutions which included public, charter, private secular, or private non-secular. The geographic regions encompassed educators from the east and west coast of the United States. The population and sample were purposively selected following guidelines established by Twining (2009) where the goal is to draw data from individuals best positioned to observe and comment on the research phenomenon of interest. Accordingly, the sample of interest were educators who had experienced or observed bullying in the workplace, either at the school site or school district offices. Educators self-selected to participate in response to announcements posted electronically via social networking websites. Interested individuals returned the signed Informed Consent form before the interview. The sample consisted of participants who were professional educators who had experienced or observed bullying in the workplace. The 37 women and 9 men were credentialed educators and had worked in the field of education for a minimum of one school year in a U.S. based school setting (see Table 1).

Table 1. Demographics

Region (U.S.) in which Workplace Bullying took place	Number of Participants	Percentage
Northeast	21	46
South	4	9
West Coast	21	46
Age Range		

25-35	10	22
36-45	13	28
46-60	11	24
60+	12	26
Gender of victim		
Male	9	20
Female	37	80
Type of School or District		
Public	26	5
Charter	6	13
Private Secular	12	26
Private Non-secular	2	4
Number of Years Teaching		
1-5	10	22
6-10	6	13
11-15	5	11
16-20	9	20
20+	16	35
Position of victim within district at time of incident(s)		
Classroom teacher	26	57
Education Specialist (Special Education)	14	30
District level supervisor	1	2
Assistant Principal/Principal	4	9
Superintendent	1	2
Gender of bully		
Male	16	35
Female	30	65
Position of bully at time of incident (s)		
Classroom teacher	13	28
Education Specialist (Special Educator)	6	13
District level supervisor	5	11
Assistant Principal/Principal	9	4
Assistant Superintendent/Superintendent	4	9
Owner of School	7	15
School Board Member	2	4
Support from School or School District		
Yes	2	4
No	44	96

Note: n = 46

5 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Telephone and face-to-face interviews were conducted with 46 educators who self-selected as participants and were willing to share their experiences as victims of bullying or as observers of bullying behavior in the workplace. Transcripts of the interviews were sent to the participants for a members' check to make sure their comments were accurately represented. A content analysis approach was employed since this process is more amenable than other types of analysis and allows researchers to describe the data in a more systematic way (Finfgeld-Connett 2013; White and Marsh, 2006).

Upon participant verification, the transcribed interviews were coded using tables developed in a Word document to determine emerging themes. The research team applied a process of inductive thematic coding to gain insight into the observations and lived experiences of the study participants (Riessman 2008). Researchers worked individually and collectively to reach agreement on the themes and patterns that emerged during analysis. Team members read separately, then compared notes as they read text generated from interviews, followed by thorough analysis of the data. Saturation, where no new ideas were evident, was determined upon review of all data. Demographic descriptions were developed in the first phases of analysis. An inductive process was employed which included a hermeneutic circle to obtain a holistic understanding of the data, evaluate first

impressions, develop units of meaning, and integrate findings (Ziegler et al. 2006). By employing hermeneutics, the analysis compliments phenomenology to focus meaning and understanding from the participant data (Myers 1995). Highlight colors were used in the Word document to visually mark codes and themes.

6 RESULTS

Participants self-selected to be interviewed. All interview participants conveyed prevalent themes which were indicative of verbal abuse, psychological effects to the victim, physiological effects, and effects on the school organization which resulted from the workplace bullying (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Dominant Themes
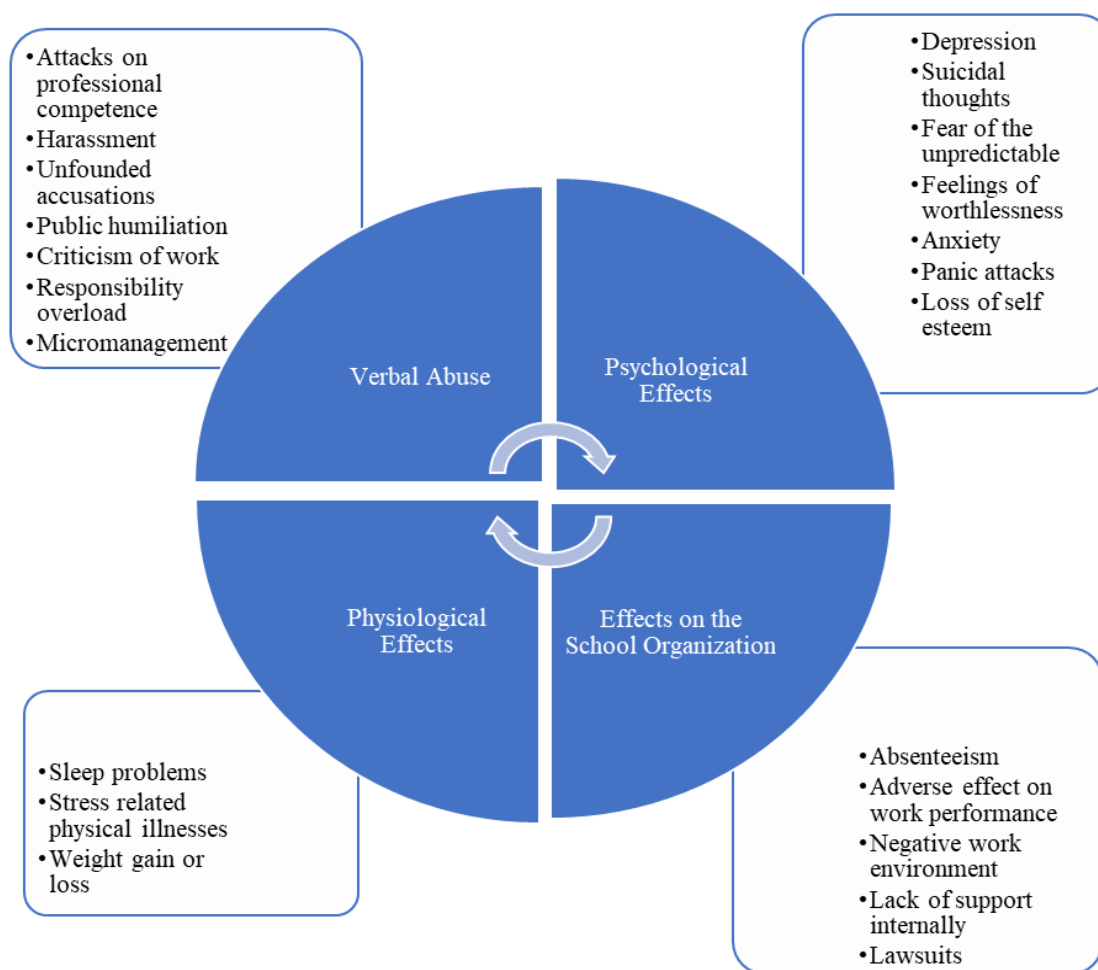
6.1 Verbal abuse

Lutgen-Sandvik (2003) refers to emotional abuse of employees as repetitive, targeted, and destruction communication. Persons who abuse other adults in the workplace do so as more powerful members inflicting abuse on the less powerful. This generally takes place through different forms of verbal abuse. Lutgen-Sandvik (2003) explained that emotional abusers are skilled at providing constructive feedback because organizations require the feedback as documentation. When there is a constant barrage of paperwork against the staff member, the staff member does not have a voice. This continuous barrage, both verbal and written, leads to a staff member being on constant alert and exhibiting fear. Einarsen (1999) described the hostile and aggressive environment in which the culture is tolerant of the bully and bullying as "predatory bullying".

Administrators who bully exhibit micro-management by excessively monitoring the staff member's work and are overly critical of the work that the staff member does complete (DeVos and Kirsten, 2015). Gena spoke of being micromanaged. *It felt like every five minutes I got called down to the office. I was called down at least once a day. One time it was that my grades were not on time yesterday. Well, they weren't due for another week.* Macey expressed micromanagement in this way: *What she told me to do was always to make me a moving target and I didn't understand that until years after. That's why I could never succeed. She kept changing the target and changing the deadlines. She made it so that I could not ever succeed.*

Testimonies from the study participants demonstrated they felt micro-managed and verbally criticized in front of colleagues or students. Gena expressed it in this way: *The principal from the high school reached across the table as he was on the opposite side from me and stuck a finger in my face and said, "You are a problem. You always have been a problem. You have been a problem since way back. You never believe we can do anything." He was screaming at me across the table. All the while a room full of administrators are sitting right there. The special ed director was typing away. My building principal said nothing. My file is full of many good recommendations from over 25 years. Now my file is full of letters that aren't true. I just had to continually defend myself against false accusations. I was frequently called into her office and spoken down to.*

Positive human connections are a necessity. When the connections go astray, one of the individuals in the relationship suffers humiliation because the humiliator has power over the person he/she is humiliating. The humiliated person suffers from powerlessness, anxiety, fear, and shame. A witness to the events may also develop a fear of the humiliator. Humiliation affects the person's self-identity and goes to core of the person's self (Hartling and Luchetta 1999). The construct of humiliation as used by Hartling and Luchetta (1999) is defined as "the deep dysphoric feeling associated with being or perceiving oneself as being unjustly degraded, ridiculed, or put down -- in particular, one's identity has been demeaned or devalued" (p. 264). Participants in the study voiced the humiliation they perceived was a result of the workplace bullying they were subjected to.

Vicki spoke of her humiliation when she shared that her principal would make snide comments directed at her. *The attacks only worsened in my fourth year when we were teaching on the same grade level team. Despite my "untraditional" teaching methods, my students consistently outperformed hers on various assessments. It got to the point where she would stick her head in my classroom and make comments about what my students should and should not be doing while I was teaching.* Vicki added that special education teachers are a team, but she was blocked from teamwork, consequently *even the teachers I worked with didn't really want to spend time talking to me because they would be associated with me and therefore be spoken to.* Josie expressed her humiliation: *She (the principal) would pick on one small thing and would continue to pick on it, even in front of other people. She would encourage my colleagues to complain about me.* Patty said *He came into my room and in front of the class, he started yelling. The yelling was escalating, and I asked if we could talk about it later. His voice grew, and he kept shouting. I was scared. Not only was I scared for myself, but for the students who witnessed this. The humiliation was unbearable. The accusations were unfounded and relentless.* Liz summed up her humiliation by expressing the following: *His abuse was always verbal. It was unrelenting and humiliating.*

The criticism of work, unfair distribution of workload, and high task and responsibility overload led participants to work even harder. Macey shared what happened to her. *You know the horse that keeps trying no matter what. He works harder. I'm going to work harder—that's what I thought. But I was the horse. I kept saying Okay, well we have half ration, so I have to work harder. I need to do more. I'll work harder. I felt I was the horse every time she said, "I must do this. I need to learn to do that. I need to work harder." Eventually, I figured out that she kept moving the line. So, when I met the goal, she would move the line. I tried to meet the next goal. She kept leading me on. I just felt at the end so discouraged and just started to believe that I wasn't a good teacher.*

6.2 Psychological Concerns

The victim may develop mental health issues after repeated verbal attacks or anticipated attacks, being shunned or blackballed. The staff member's self-esteem is reduced and feelings of depression, helplessness, and anxiety of the unpredictable ensue. The anticipation of an encounter with the bully leads to fear, being emotionally drained, and exhausted. Micro-aggression is demeaning to the victim and impacts one's self-esteem, lowers the person's sense of self and well-being as well as marginalization from the staff as a social and collaborative group (Leon-Perez et al. 2014). Studies have found that workplace bullying psychological distress and vulnerability as well as increased risk of mental health problems. The most serious of the psychological effects is depression and suicidal thoughts. As Macey told her story, she revealed that she was diagnosed with depression and severe anxiety disorder. Gena added, *The HS principal began by telling me that I was to blame for all this and that I was going to get this student to the HS full-time by the end of the month. I told them that it is a team decision and we had a plan to transition the student. That is when the high school principal leaned over the table and put his finger in my face. He yelled at me and told me that I had been a problem in this district since another student came to the HS from the middle school. We left that meeting and I told my principal that I would never meet with administration without representation again. I went to the nurse's office and cried.* Patty said, *I had to go on medication for depression and anxiety. It impacted my physical and mental health.*

PTSD and suicidal thoughts were expressed by two participants. Amy told this story. *The teacher was threatened through emails and in meetings. She said she contemplated suicide on a daily basis. I reported it to the superintendent. Not much was done about it. She ended up resigning.* Participant Patty told it this way. *When this happened directly to me, it was not only draining but it emotionally and mentally raped me. I was in such shock and today I still have PTSD when I think of this event.*

Feelings of helplessness and worthlessness were expressed by nearly all the participants. Gena articulated, *I did not realize how downtrodden and burdened I had been. I truly believed when I'd left, I was not a good teacher anymore and I was not an effective teacher. The principal actually said to me that I should find another job because I am not a teacher and she tore out*

my soul. Katie voiced her helpless feelings in this way. *I started to doubt my ability to teach. I was afraid that I was not meant to be in the classroom anymore.*

Fear was an overwhelming emotion for the participants. Fear of the unpredictable was especially apparent in what they verbalized. Vicki told her story of fear. *The administrator observed my class more frequently than I had been observed in my first two years, and the feedback was always negative. In one feedback session, she would tell me I needed to change ABC to XYZ. I would make the adjustments, but in the next feedback session, she would tell me I had to change XYZ to ABC. No matter what I did, I could not get this woman off my back or make her happy. I knew I was not this terrible teacher she was painting me to be, but I had no idea how to fix the situation or what or if I was actually doing anything wrong.* Participant Macey's story was that she was in constant stress. *Coming into the building was no fun. It was like, "What are they going to do today?" I had worked for so many years and just didn't want to get out of bed to go to work anymore because it was like it was fearful for me to go to work. It was a struggle thinking it would get better.* Carole tried to allay her fears by avoiding the front office or going to her mailbox. She would leave immediately after school so to avoid being cornered. She said that she *didn't know what to do and was at a breaking point.*

Anxiety and panic attacks happened at school and in the community when the bully was present. Gena told her story. *The principal walked into the wake. We were in a back corner and I spotted him immediately. I couldn't breathe. I thought I was having a panic attack.* Macey shared that the threatening mortified her until she became afraid of her. *Every time she came near me or to speak to me, I could feel my heart pounding so hard that I thought it was going to come out.*

Feelings of not being appreciated/loss of self-esteem was expressed many times. Participant Gretchen summarized these feelings in this manner. *The one thing when looking for another position in education, if I ever go back to education, is to find a school in administration where they value the work that I do and the person that I am.*

6.3 Physiological Concerns

When staff members at all levels in the school organization are subjected to the emotional manipulation of an adult bully, physiological symptoms are a logical consequence. Even occasional bullying was found to be predictive of sleep problems, included poor quality of overall sleep patterns (Hansen et al. 2013; Lallukka et al. 2011). Beyond sleep disorders, other types of physiological events may occur which include stress related physical illness and weight gain or loss. Physiological problems may be compounded by the psychological effects of bullying (Giorgi et al. 2016) and may lead the victim to feel not worthy of working at the school, within the school district, or continuing in the profession as an educator (Singhal 2017).

Sleep difficulties have been documented as one of the reported effects of a bullied individual (Hansen et al. 2013; Niedhammer et al. 2009). Studies have also indicated that persons who have been targets of a bully in the workplace have a lower quality of sleep and may use sleep inducing medications to help with sleep (Vartia 2001; Notelaers et al. 2006). Severe sleep problems can lead to absenteeism resulting from stress and lack of sleep (Rodriguez-Munoz et al. 2015). Macey shared that she was diagnosed as having severe sleep apnea. Nancy voiced what other participants also said. *I was completely terrified of the situation, couldn't sleep, and was wondering if this was the right career move.*

Stress-related physical illnesses were a common thread among the participants. Macey remarked, *I can tell you that I probably could not have gone back to work for that first year because of the turmoil. I felt like I needed the whole year to just kind of like put myself back together. I felt like Humpty Dumpty. The stress level was unreal.* Nancy and Gretchen reported that they were nauseous every day. Nancy said, *I would get up in the morning and barely make my way to school.* Gretchen emphasized that she *would be sick from stress in the morning wondering if an unexpected email or verbal confrontation would happen.* Vicki reported both physical and psychological reactions. *I felt that I was failing professionally, in relationships and academically. Emotionally, this was only part of what to a week-long hospitalization after an overdose.*

Weight gain or loss was another common physiological finding. Macey commented that she could not eat or sleep and gained weight from not eating properly. *I gained 100 pounds during those five years. And that increased my difficulty with breathing. I stopped breathing approximately every two minutes all night long and my body would have to wake up in order to breathe.* JP declared that *I actually lost weight. I couldn't eat while I was at work.* Carole said she *was miserable and lost 10 pounds in a month.*

6.4 Effects on the Organization: School and School District

The effects of bullying behaviors within an organization such as increased absenteeism, staff resignations or leavings, an absence of support systems in place, and lawsuits result in the increase of revenue loss to the general annual budget for a school (Magee et al. 2017). Absenteeism has a profound financial impact on the cost of personnel, specifically in the increased hiring of substitute staff. The depletion of quality personnel for an unforeseeable timeframe, due to the harboring of individuals who bully within a school or the school district, has a detrimental impact on the reduction and disruption of learning for the students (NEA 2012). When staff suddenly resign or leave at the end of the school year, the school or district is forced to find a replacement. Lawsuits are becoming more frequent as staff feel the bully should suffer consequences and bullied administrators no longer wish to leave their places of employment (Cooke 2018; Kronebusch 2016; Singhal 2017). Participants in this study found that support services,

either with a union, when available, or for mental health, were generally unavailable, and if available, were of little to no use to the target.

Consequences to the school district or school can range from employee absenteeism to retirement or departure. For the staff member, ramifications of being forced out of the profession may lead to early retirement and loss of severance (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
Staff Member Consequences

Participants expressed how they dealt with the bullying behaviors and what effects this had on their schools and districts. There were also the residual effects of what occurred after the participants resigned or left for another position.

Macey expressed that her psychologist said she had enough ammunition for a great deal of trouble. Instead, she chose to view the experience as learning a lesson. She felt *I am becoming a better person.* Vicki said*, I never found out why either woman had so many problems with me, and I was glad to leave such a hostile work environment. When everything you do is questioned life becomes miserable.*

Participants who left the field of teaching expressed their feelings. Gena reported, *I knew that evening he corralled me into his office, closed the door, and stood in front of the door that I could not work there anymore, even after almost 28 years of service to the district. I drafted a letter to the district that I was going to retire. I don't think I would have survived being in that kind of hostile environment. I physically and mentally had nothing left.* Macey said that she did not work for six months after she left and had to live off her sick pay.

Ron expressed this about a teacher. *The threats were so real, nasty, and completely humiliating. The teacher on a daily basis was contemplating suicide. For her own health, the teacher resigned.* Patty said the following: *When I finished teaching my last class, I packed up my belongings, what little I had in the classroom and I walked out. I had been a teacher at that school for 10 years. I left the key in my mailbox and a note on the secretary's desk in an envelope. I had to process what happened. To this day, I am still in shock that I could be treated this way.* Marshall said, *When it became too much, I quit. I didn't want to do this, but I could no longer take the abuse.* Gretchen, too, resigned. *There was no one to turn to for help. I barely hung on until the end of the school year. On the last day of school, I resigned my position.* Amy declared that she could not *work like this any longer and stay in the field of education, the profession I love.*

Support issues were clearly not available for the participants. Vicki said that *there were no supports for those being bullied by the superintendent*. Nancy appealed to her union to no effect. *Bullied people did seek union support. Both people quit their jobs and lost retirement benefits. I wasn't able to find services within the school district to support my mental health concerns.* Bridget found the same issue. *The teachers' union was consulted and appeared to want to help. In the end, though, the representative backed down and did not end up being helpful at all.*

Katie discussed the lack of mental health services. *There are no mental health services available and if there are, we really don't know if those would apply to instances of being bullied by principals or other administrators.* JP also discussed the lack of support services. *We don't have services to support teachers when it comes to being bullied or harassed by other workers. There are no workshops on how to detect this type of bullying in the workplace.* Danny said the following. *There are no mental*

health services available, nor counseling services, nor group types of therapies. I think regardless of the school; all schools should be required by the state to offer these types of services to support educators. Ron continued on this same point. *Our school district does not offer mental health services or any type of workshops on what harassment of educators by educators is or bullying of educators by administrators or district staff. I think it would be very valuable if such services would be available to all members of a school district, not just the teachers but also the special education teachers, the specialists, the administrators at each of the schools and also people at the district office. This way we can have a happy, healthy, and safe working environment for* *everybody.*

6.5 The Bully

Participants reported the toxicity of the bully in the educational workplace. The bully often blamed the staff member for shortcomings, real or not. The bully's lack of empathy for the targeted victim and the toxic work environment that he/she is causing perpetrates a sense or feeling of inadequacy in the targeted staff member. Teachers reported that principals bullied them because of the teacher's superior knowledge or skill, being liked by students and parents, and their innovative approaches in the classroom or in the development and execution of curriculum (Blasé et al. 2008). The principals considered this a threat. Parker (2014) found that participants were silenced, ignored, or expected to obediently do as told by the supervising bully. Bullies often exhibit Machiavellian tendencies, that is, they manipulate others, especially in social situations such as staff meetings, for their own personal gain (Pilch and Turska 2014).

Control was one of themes that became evident with the bully. Macey stated, *Any teacher with a bit of power got that stripped away. It's the power she didn't want them to have. She abused her power in any way she could.* Marshall was more direct in his response. *The school's director-controlled people through intimidation and verbal abuse. Both included threats of termination for noncompliance.* As a bystander, Nancy expressed what she felt. *powerless to address the unequal application of the administrator's power. I felt my colleagues were targeted to drive them out of their jobs.*

The tendency of the bully to intimidate high achievers in the district was evident in the participants' responses. James spoke of the loss of high achieving young teachers. *We lost many young, enthusiastic, and qualified teachers because of the actions of this one person. It affected everyone on staff both mentally and emotionally. At the end of the day we would be drained.* Marshall reported, *No matter what I did, no matter how many awards the robotics teams won, it was never enough. It was just too much for me to bear and I needed to find a place where my talent and vision would be accepted, to allow my students to flourish and find the love of engineering.*

The bully himself or herself felt intimidation according to the participants. Carole verbalized that *the bully felt intimidated by anyone that she felt was popular with the students and knew what they were doing.* Several participants expressed the outside praise the bully wanted to receive from others. Macy responded; *This woman needed accolades for herself. She needed people who are constantly giving her praise. Amy's response was closely related.* When she (bully) is not recognized, then she takes it out on me. *The verbal abuse is never-ending, and I purposefully make sure I am not in my office if I know she is nearby. Carlie said* that *her ego got in the way. That I was respected for the job that I was doing, and she couldn't stand the fact that I was upstaging her.*

7 DISCUSSION

School districts or individual schools are constantly under the public's perspective vision. Workplace bullying is not always to always visible to students, parents, or other employees unless the bullying directly affects them, as in the administrator who walks into a classroom and berates a teacher, an administrator who forces an illegal change to a student's IEP, or the administrator who overloads a staff member with an inordinate amount of work. It is critical that a school district or private school develop both preventive measures and interventions before the effects of workplace bullying take a toll on the school organization.

7.1 Implications Leading to a Positive School Culture

The organizational culture of a school or district includes the attributes of safety in the environment, being treated with respect and dignity, and appreciation for members' knowledge and skill related to the teaching profession. Schools and school districts need to assess their own organizations for a healthy school culture utilizing school climate surveys in which the results are made public. The United States has a culture of administrators being superior to those below them (Blasé et al. 2008). Schools, as an organizational structure, follow this structure. Teachers fear challenging a person in authority. Findings from this study indicate that improved leadership preparation, training of all employees in what constitutes workplace bullying, a workplace bullying policy in place, and evidence of support services for bullied staff members are all needed. In addition, teachers who are in training need assertiveness training, so they are not in a position of being bullied and supervision and evaluation of principals, directors, and superintendents need to be bolstered.

7.2 Leadership Preparation and Training

Two of the five core functions in leadership training that the Wallace Foundation (Mitgang, 2012) reported are creating a climate hospitable to education and managing people and processes to foster school improvement. While these two functions only marginally address the ethics of leadership, they do allude to the need of either college preparation programs or school advancement programs to pay attention to the necessity of a positive school climate. More emphasis needs to occur on not just the observation and development of staff, but the ethics of leading a staff. Principals' mistreatment of teachers suggests the importance of school leaders becoming more aware of the treatment and personnel matters of their staff - being empathic of staff dynamics and building relationships and trust with their faculties (Blasé and Blasé 2003; de Wet 2010; Kutsyuruba et al. 2016). Berkovich and Eyal (2017) suggested that principal training should involve simulation training in which the principal candidate receives feedback focused on his or her emotional dynamics to help the candidate have a better understanding of what their own emotional influence is on staff. Not only principals, but also other mental health workers, should have coursework that emphasizes their role in maintaining a healthy school culture. This includes School Social Workers, School Psychologists, and Guidance Counselors.

7.3 Training for All Employees

Adult bullies in the workplace continue to bully when there are no negative consequences for their behavior (Rayner and Keashley, 2005). If no one confronts the behavior of the bully, the bullying behavior will continue. All staff, including administrators, need to be trained in all aspects of what bullying behaviors look like. Staff and administrators need to know what strategies they can use when confronted with a bullying situation, especially one that spirals out of control for the victim. Weber (2014) advised that bullying behaviors never be ignored and that victims keep a log book of dates, times, what the incident involved, who may have been a bystander to the incident, and what the bully said or did.

DeVos (2013) recommends that training occur at different levels. The professional level involves a working relationship with mental health and law professionals associated with the district. These professionals can provide legal and health-related training to all staff. DeVos (2013) also recommended that training be done at a social and community level and includes the Department of Education from the state level and the unions if there is union representation in the district. At the administrative level, all administrators need to be trained not only about the effects of bullying but also about the potential for their own behaviors to be interpreted as a bullying situation.

Professional development training for staff should be offered through the school district detailing how to deal with adult bullying, what to do if they are a bystander witness to bullying, and whom to turn to when there is a perception of being bullied. The goal is to create a school-wide culture that does not tolerate adult bullying behaviors. The climate within a school and school district should be one where education professionals feel safe in reporting issues of bullying regardless of who perpetrated the behavior. Mental health workers within the district should be a part of the development of the staff development sessions.

7.4 Policy Making

Policies that address bullying behaviors by adults in the school workplace are necessary. School boards need to include disciplinary and legal consequences for adult bullying and a specific method for the reporting of bullying behaviors, thus ensuring a statement of commitment that bullying behaviors will not be tolerated (Richards and Daley 2003). Bullied employees must be protected from retaliation (Ritzman 2016). The policy should state that there will be an immediate and fair review of any suspected workplace bullying incident. The policy should direct the schools to incorporate annual climate and culture assessments as well as bullying intervention and prevention (Rayner and Lewis 2011). Because the organizational structure of schools and school districts are a top down hierarchical structure, the policy should contain a designated liaison staff member (Fahie and Devine 2014; Piotrowski and King, 2016). All procedures should be clearly delineated to reduce any bias and must be enforced in a fair and consistent manner regardless of the level within the organization the bully holds (Ritzman 2016). School Boards have a duty to have a Workplace Harassment and Bullying Policy that prohibits workplace bullying, defines it, encourages reporting of workplace bullying incidents, and places responsibility of all adults in the school district to know the policy and be trained in the content of the policy (Farmer 2011; National Education Union 2019).

7.5 Increased Support Services

Staff members and administrators who perceive that they are being bullied need to know that there are people on staff who can be trusted to help resolve bullying issues. These staff persons may include the School Social Worker, the School Psychologist, or a trusted administrator or Human Resource (HR) Director. Human Resource personnel are primary in developing intervention strategies, ensuring that training occurs, and potential sources of support (Gupta et al. 2020; Piotrowski and King, 2016; Wiedmer, 2011). However, leaders in HR positions can be responsible in their duties to the person who is the bully, which can lead to a paradoxical situation. In this instance, the HR leader needs to be able to provide the staff member with additional supports, including the names of specific individuals who can be contacted, remain in the victim's or observer's confidence, and provide the support services needed.

Workplace Bullying of K-12 Educators: Mental Health Services and Policy Considerations

Several study participants, as educators in public-school systems, reported having a teacher union within their district and union representation at their school site. Although the participants reported that a union existed in the school district, the union support did not play a role in advocating for the victims of bullying. Additionally, the teacher unions of the study participants did not have services available to assist victims of bullying. The educators noted services and programs are not available to assist adults who are victims of bullying, although such services exist for students who attend their respective schools. The psychological realities of bullying in the workplace, even within a school setting is real, and "directly affects the educational success of students" (Weber 2014, para. 6). The need for services to support adults who are victims of bullying is essential in developing a school culture and environment where all members of the school community feel a sense of belonging, safe, and valued.

8 HUMAN RESOURCE PERSONNEL, SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS, AND SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS

The prevention of student bullying has been a preeminent decree of the U.S. Department of Education, calling for a united effort to address and prevent this behavior. The same level of awareness needs to be placed on workplace bullying of education professionals. The process of preventing workplace bullying takes the entire school community, where an inviting and safe school climate exists, and everyone feels that they belong. School psychologists play a significant role in identifying and combating bullying in the workplace. Working collaboratively with Human Resource Directors, school psychologists may have the expertise to craft formidable policy on workplace bullying. Highly qualified educators may leave the classroom and the field of education completely due to an absence of support within the school and the district's HR department (OECD 2011).

School psychologists and School Social Workers are in an inimitable position within a school of being able to observe the behaviors of individuals, interactions of educators and education leaders and relationships forged, encourage an understanding of differences, and to help schools solve critical problems (CASP, 2003). Based on intimate knowledge of the school culture, the school psychologist can be an advocate and voice for fellow educators. One of the roles of school psychologists is to promote wellness within the school community (NASP 2014). An effective prevention program cultivates a working environment that is respectful and supportive of relationships among students, parents/guardians, educators, and staff (Greenberg et al. 2003; Gupta et al. 2020). Although the role of the school psychologist primarily focuses on student wellness, school psychologists are uniquely qualified to design and support mental health services and crisis intervention in collaborative leadership situations to benefit all members of the school community, including teachers and education leaders (CASP 2003; NASP 2014). "School psychologists are ethically obligated to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to learn and develop in an environment free from discrimination, harassment, aggression, violence, and abuse" (NASP 2012, p. 1). The same tenets applied in advocating for students can easily be transferred to supporting direct services to bullied staff.

9 LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The research sought participants through LinkedIn and word of mouth. Persons attracted to this study were those who were bullied or may have witnessed bullying in the school workplace. Self-reports may not be an objective measure. The sample for this study was relatively small and may not be representative of all school districts in the U.S. Future research may locate whole schools, school districts, or teacher unions to participate to procure a sample population that is not responding to a request for participation. Further research could also involve a study of Human Resource personnel and how they view their role in workplace bullying. Lastly, a comprehensive review of the research literature on bullied teachers and administrators may determine characteristics that are common to them and which exposes them to the workplace bully.

10 SUMMARY AND RESEARCHERS' REFLECTIONS

Workplace bullying should not be tolerated in the field of education. Staff members at any level within a school or school district should not be subjected to workplace bullying. The results of workplace bullying can affect a school district's budget, the morale of a school or district, the mental health of targets, and the learning potential of students. This research study surveyed participants who are practicing professionals in the field of education to determine the extent of the problem of workplace bullying and victimization as expressed by the participants. The results of the study included participant responses and suggestions that educational leadership may consider when implementing adult bullying prevention at the school site or within a school district to alleviate the issue of workplace bullying.

Whenever a researcher decides to engage participants in emotionally charged interviews, the researcher has to remain in the role of interviewer. At times, this is difficult, as the stories told for this research study were stories that could bring out emotions of anger, sadness, and distrust at educational systems, practices, and personnel. One person cannot change the system, but workplace bullying in schools can be diminished or eradicated if everyone is given the opportunity to have the courage to stand up to those who bully. No school board member, superintendent, director, or principal should be permitted to stay in the field of education if he or she engages in bullying. It is only when the leadership in schools and districts demands an environment of respect in all buildings and facilities that employees will feel safe and valued within an improved culture and work climate.

Workplace Bullying of K-12 Educators: Mental Health Services and Policy Considerations

Creativity and innovation as well as nurturance and support cannot thrive and benefit the learning of students when anyone is the target of another's authoritarian bullying. No school administrator or teacher should have to leave school on any given day feeling depressed, anxious, or abused. Administrators and teachers are asked to come to work each day and greet colleagues and students in a welcoming and caring manner. They deserve an environment that is free of workplace bullying to enable them to be at their best for the students, the school, and the community.

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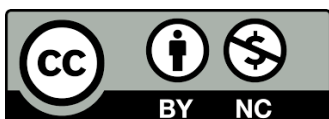
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