



Bullying in the Staffroom

Dennis Sleigh

Teachers often deal with bullying among their students, but how many people realise these same teachers are themselves often the victims of bullying? Workplace bullying has emerged as a significant industrial problem in education and current research indicates that teachers are highly represented in the statistics of victims. Work done by Monash University recently revealed alarming figures about significant bullying experienced by principals, with principals experiencing six times more bullying than the general workforce (Courier Mail, 3/7/2013). Other research by the Australian

Education Union last year highlighted bullying suffered by class teachers, often from their principals (Herald Sun, 24 Sept. 2012).

There appear to be three separate issues: bullying by parents, bullying by colleagues, and bullying by superiors. In the next three issues of *Education Today*, I plan to explore each of them.

As a long-time teacher I am reluctant to admit the prevalence of such violence by teachers towards their colleagues. After all, we not only spend hours dealing with bullies in the classroom and the playground, but we also have a lot to say about the stupidity of bullying. We all have our pet theories about the causes of bullying

and most of us have attended conferences, seminars or staff meetings where these ideas have been further nurtured. How, then, given our strong antipathy towards bullying, can we commit the same offences ourselves?

For this issue, I decided to look at bullying by 'the system'. A possible cause of such behaviour was mentioned recently in another profession: the health service. According to the Sydney Morning Herald (Bullying Rife in Health System, SMH, 21/7/13) that reported on the incidence of bullying in hospitals, recent *cuts to funding* meant increased pressure on an already-stretched medical staff. A ministerial response



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played down the bullying incidents but failed to refute the data, which were well above accepted Government limits.

One might suggest that politicians should know a lot on this topic. They themselves are subjected to severe bullying, regardless of their party, and their frequent exposure to this form of behaviour might dull their sensitivity to the issue. Whether it is the media, the other side of the House, disgruntled voters or anonymous party officials, the sitting Members put up with a lot. Whether or not some politicians lose their sensitivity in this matter, no-one enjoys being labelled as the cause of increased bullying. However, such delicacy cannot disguise a serious problem: the people who run our public service departments are becoming more and more squeezed by their political masters (and mistresses) as budget cuts and so-called efficiency programs impact on their ability to maintain services. No wonder the public servants are reeling and no wonder their subordinates, in turn, are getting harder to live with. It is a classic case of “Managing Director Kicks Cat”. You probably know the story...

The Managing Director snarled at his Personal Assistant when he saw the budget figures, and she walked out of the room humiliated. She saw the Branch Manager in the corridor and rudely demanded that he have some complex reports on her desk by nine the next morning. The Branch Manager ran into his Marketing Manager in the staff room and yelled at him for the poor responses to the latest product survey; the Marketing Manager screamed at his deputy for being late for the staff meeting that afternoon; the Deputy Manager lashed out at the delivery boy when he

put the mail down on his desk, knocking over a poorly placed coffee cup; the delivery boy snapped at the elderly lift attendant when the elevator seemed to be moving more slowly than usual, and the lift attendant, knocking off for the day, went home and kicked the cat.

Whoever kicked it – the MD or the lift attendant – the cat certainly felt it, and so it is with those people at the bottom of any chain of command.

Today, it is not surprising that senior people in education systems are feeling the pressure. They are being hounded by politicians who dream impossible dreams, offer improbable solutions, and cry copious tears when their ranting is exposed. Consider NAPLAN: what started out as a worthy idea quickly became a farce when the Prime Minister of the day announced that if parents didn't like their children's results, they should enrol them elsewhere, since “that's exactly what the system is designed to do.” Fortunately, the advice wasn't widely heeded.

An equally obscene political suggestion is the one that says that by devolving greater power to the individual school and its community, we are going to see greater performance. If it was that simple, why has Victoria not made greater progress in the past 20 years? I am all in favour of school autonomy, provided the school system supports this autonomy in a real way.

I am reminded of the tragic decision in NSW mental health when 30 years ago, the Richmond Report determined that support for psychiatric patients would best be offered if they were sent away from institutions and looked after at home. Sadly, too little was done to provide the necessary infrastructure and so a dream became

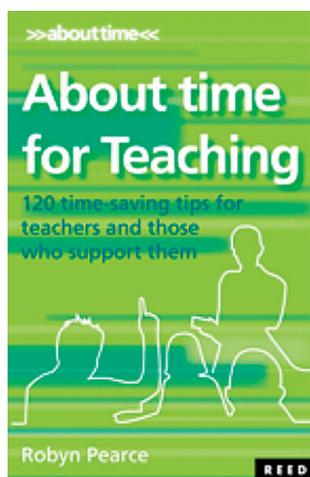
a nightmare. Naturally, there were some benefits – local doctors took on a greater role in mental health cases and some very poor institutions were closed (along with some very good ones). However, the desired outcome – better service of those in need – was not met. The same may well be true if education is decentralised to the extent being advocated today.

What, you might say, has this to do with bullying? The connection is quite simple: the utopian demands of political well-wishers, obsequiously agreed to by out-of-touch bureaucrats, can simply lead to more pressures and more kicked cats.

If education directors are left hanging when they seek advance notice of major financial changes, and if principals are deprived of information about the real agenda behind innovations, it is natural that these people display signs of this insecurity. Education systems under fire because of genuine concerns about episodes of paedophilia cannot be blamed if they over-react to false or vexatious allegations. No-one wants to be burned when charges are laid; therefore they engage in depersonalised i-dotting and t-crossing to ensure that no stench will attach to them. If subordinates suffer as a consequence, that is simply collateral damage.

As a science student in secondary school I probably missed the point of many of the science lessons presented by my dedicated mentors, but I do remember an experiment when we were using ping pong balls. The teacher had introduced us to Archimedes, and asked us to see what happened when we pressed down on one or more balls floating in a water-filled basin. The result was always the same: water rose up as we pressed down, and it spilled over the side of the container. Soon there was more water outside the basin than inside it.

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A parallel situation exists in any hierarchical institution when those at the top start pressuring those below them – except that the spill-over tends to be real human lives, people ejected from the system because of inordinate and ill-considered stresses. This is *industrial bullying*. The current federal government was elected on a promise that public service jobs would be significantly reduced, and I suppose that this means they now have the mandate to do precisely that. Based on multiple previous examples of the same policy, we can be confident that – notwithstanding promises to the contrary – the cuts will be felt in those areas where face-to-face service is conducted. This will mean less service for us, more pressure for those providing the service. (It is highly unlikely that the brilliant planners who devise these schemes will feel the threat of dismissal; their jobs have to be maintained so that further plans can be produced in the future!)

Given this reduction in staffing, the workers will suffer, but so will their superiors. The latter will no longer have as many staff to carry out the various schemes developed by their political masters, and so their management abilities will also be questioned. Herein lies the recipe for further bullying.

If all of this simply arouses a sense of *déjà vu*, it is perhaps time to ask: how can this cycle be broken? We probably recognise that we cannot do much about the political and financial pressures that are creating tensions for our superiors, but we can still do something useful if we feel we are being pressured (bullied) by them to perform in a way that is quite unreasonable. Let's draw on what we do when we detect student bullying.

First we must *acknowledge the problem*. We cannot stop classroom bullying until someone admits that they are being a bully and that

First we must acknowledge the problem. We cannot stop classroom bullying until someone admits that they are being a bully and that someone else is being a victim

someone else is being a victim; likewise we cannot deal with top down bullying unless we name the problem. This might be done through a teachers' union, principals' association, or – for the really brave – by face-to-face contact with the senior personnel. Whoever does it, it is important to remember that until someone insists on the *reality* of the problem, no solutions will occur.

The next step is *name the perpetrators*. It is one thing to agree that there is a bullying culture in your work place, but until it is made more specific, there is little hope that it will be dealt with. If the bullying is coming from the principal, the principal must be confronted with this charge; if the cause is a subject co-ordinator or a canteen manager, a teacher-librarian or a School Council member, the same applies. If the source is higher, then that person must also be named. If a regional officer is making life difficult for principals, the principals must go higher and complain. If it is the Director General, or the Minister, they must also be shown they are not exempt. At this stage I can hear readers sigh, complaining that they don't have the power or the pull to tackle that level of abuse, but just remember that the same cry is often heard from students when we try to encourage them to report prominent bullies in *their* life. Until we name the perpetrator, we cannot stop their crimes.

It is here that the third step becomes important: *maintain detailed records*. If the behaviour is on-going, keep a diary and record even the smallest examples, to show you are being subjected to a bullying mentality.

This evidence will be useful whether you are reporting to your superiors (and the very act of reporting to them should also be diarised) or if you are later involved in legal action.

Finally, *involve the bystanders*. Most teachers have witnessed situations where one or two bullies have victimised one or two targets – in front of many “impartial” observers. These bystanders are, in fact, rarely impartial. They either empathise with the victim or they support the bully. In the latter case, they add to the damage done by laughing or cheering when the bully strikes. In the former case, however, they probably see themselves as ‘uninvolved’. In reality, by staying silent, they are actually supporting the bullying culture. These are the people that need to be empowered to act positively. If you are fighting a powerful bully, try to get these people to understand their own security is at risk or, better, to acknowledge that their professionalism demands that they too act. Only in this situation will there be enough ground swell to convince sometimes-reluctant superiors that they must indeed act if they are to be responsible and caring employers.

In these days when lawyers seem to be attached to every office, you can be sure that the actions you take will easily be recognised by a smart lawyer as potentially explosive – and so they might well decide to advise a definite response.

There is no simple cure for bullying, especially when the bully is your superior, but if you treat the process rationally, you *can* win. Indeed, for the sake of our schools, you *must* win.

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