

# Upward Bullying in education; the current situation

**Sandra Rosner** is a NSW high school principal who has recently completed her M.Ed. with a focus on Upward Bullying in the teaching profession. This article, which examines the current manifestations of Upward Bullying in schools, follows on from her review of research into Upward Bullying, published in *Education Today* Term 4 2018

## Introduction

While workplace bullying has gained worldwide recognition and is known to contribute to a toxic work environment, most attention is paid to downward bullying and to a much lesser extent, horizontal bullying (or lateral violence). Upward Bullying has not had a light shone on it. This is unfortunate because the results of Upward Bullying include the erosion of the capacity of the target to lead and manage his or her staff, the emergence of significant productivity and performance issues and an unreasonable level of chronic stress for everyone caught up in the culture of blame, harassment and intimidation.

To conduct my research into the prevalence and effects of Upward Bullying in the teaching profession, I approached four senior

executive members of the NSW Department of Education, namely Directors, Educational Leadership and put to them a number of semi-structured interview questions. Their combined prior and current experience as educational leaders has afforded them a collective experience in 7% of public schools in NSW. None of my participants had heard of Upward Bullying prior to being approached for my research, but tellingly, all of them recognised the phenomenon immediately I explained it to them and all readily offered harrowing accounts of instances of Upward Bullying. They also gave insights into the devastating effects of this form of bullying on the target, their staff, students and the wider school community as well as on the perpetrator and his or her supporters. Although Upward Bullying was a term new to each director, they



## The consequences of Upward Bullying

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all felt there to be a substantial manifestation of Upward Bullying in schools, though it tended to take on a different character depending on whether the location was a primary or a high school.

### How prevalent is Upward Bullying in schools?

Prevalence of Upward Bullying depends to some extent on the type of school. In secondary schools, it would seem that Upward Bullying may be as high as 25%. While directors tended to consider Upward Bullying to be less prevalent in primary schools, when taking into account the wider school environment, each director had witnessed that primary school bullies were less likely to be subordinate staff and very likely to be community members who felt an unreasonable degree of ownership of the school and also of the principal. Conversely in high schools, research participants uniformly labelled major incidents of Upward Bullying as being perpetrated by staff members who had an unrealistic sense of entitlement coupled with a burning resentment. Often it was the case that when a new leader began a change process, the Upward Bully commenced one-on-one conflicts and concurrently organised a mob of supporters to take their side against the new leader. Where a school leader is not merit selected, but "imposed" on the school, the bullying feels justified by the resentful mindset that "this is not the person we wanted for the job". Likewise, where a new or existing leader is tasked with the implementation of complex and wide-ranging departmental change, Upward Bullies will not hesitate to take aim.

All research participants had witnessed and dealt with mobbing, unsubstantiated complaints and the spiral of incivility between bullies and targets. Another common phenomenon, known as management squeeze occurs when a member of the school middle executive or even the principal is bullied from below and unsupported from above, often due to the bully's ability to twist the facts to favour themselves as the victim rather than the perpetrator of bullying. There was a distinction made by interviewees between 1) a traditional bully who resents change and 2) an emergence of the ego driven bully who responds to perceived slights and injustices with swift action.

Upward Bullies, contrary to popular belief, do not pick easy targets. Their targets are whoever has formal power over them. They will attack both strong and weak leaders. The reaction of the leader will determine the path the bully takes. With a more susceptible leader, the bully will use a direct one-on-one approach. Where the leader proves him or herself to be a strong individual, the bully will switch to mobilising a mob and more oblique tactics that can leave the leader questioning their own motivations and abilities.

### What is the impact of Upward Bullying?

All four directors agreed that the disempowering impact of Upward Bullying could "stop a school in its tracks" so that leadership and management was "not about the kids anymore". The difficulty for leaders to admit they need help in managing Upward Bullies can lead to some leaders caving in and never standing up to bullies while others become bullies in their own right, fighting fire with fire. The degree of emotional intelligence and resilience needed to effectively combat Upward Bullies is immense. Schools are complex and difficult enough to run well without the additional burden of dealing with malicious intent from within. Asking for support can be seen to be an admission of weakness, so there is plentiful evidence that some school leaders ignore bullying behaviours in the forlorn hope that they will eventually dissipate. By the time bullying escalates to become impossible to ignore, the behaviours are entrenched and the culture is extremely difficult to move into a positive one. At this point, cleaning up the problem may involve moving the leader on or out of the system as well as the main protagonist. The leader who fights back tends to quickly find themselves in hot water with regard to their staff management strategies, falling into the trap laid by the Upward Bully and increasing losing support from their school community and their supervising director.

As well as destroying the culture of a school and disabling the education outcomes for the student body, the behaviour of Upward Bullies results in severe health issues for their target, that person's family and friends, the wider school community and even the physical and mental health of the bully themselves. There are no winners where Upward Bullying is allowed to manifest and grow.

### Is managing bullies just part of the principal's job?

While two of the research participants felt that managing difficult individuals sits within the customary Principal role, all participants felt strongly that a leader under attack from an Upward Bully requires both systemic and strategic support. Systemic support is growing, both with regard to what is available (for example the recently released *NSW Department of Education School Community Charter*) and the range of support within existing formal staff management systems (an expansion of consultancy roles in the *NSW Department of Education Employee Conduct and Performance Directorate – EPAC*). Directors interviewed identified a clear role for themselves, working with school leaders to recognise and effectively deal with Upward Bullies on a case-by-case basis. All participants indicated that they currently undertake such work and that this aspect of their practice could

readily be afforded greater recognition in order to collectively add to strategies for success.

### **How could school leaders be supported?**

All participants agreed that at present, we are not adequately dealing with Upward Bullying. Thankfully, structures and systems are changing and targets of Upward Bullying who ask for help are receiving it. However there are clear gaps that senior departmental executive, workplace health and safety, EPAC and our teachers' federation could examine in consultation with school executive staff in order to move to a more proactive approach for

early identification and intervention. Interviewees collectively acknowledged the necessity of focusing on growing school leadership capacity including developing the interpersonal skills of targeted leaders who respond to Upward Bullying in imprudent ways. It is optimal that school leaders now and in the future have highly developed emotional intelligence and superior resilience. Ideally, we require the capacity to recognise bullying behaviours and formalise its management. The difficulty lies in our ability as school leaders to initiate and carry through the tedious but necessary processes while simultaneously deflecting the attacks of the bully and their allies. This work requires the utmost

professionalism and concentration. It's exhausting, time consuming and for the most part, a lonely and thankless chore.

Despite the enormity of the task, Upward Bullies must not be allowed to disrupt the core business of our schools, disempower our leaders and managers and spoil the educational experiences of our students. Several of the research participants indicated that by the time they were alerted to issues around bullying in their schools, it was so late in the process that it was difficult to read the situation accurately and decide the best way to proceed. Help needs to be sought by school leaders earlier rather than later if you have an Upward Bully in your midst.

## **The devastating physiological cost of bullying**

### **The acute stress response**

When bullying takes place, there is an immediate acute stress response, which is also known as the fight-flight-freeze response. The physiology of the fight-flight-freeze response involves the autonomic nervous system, the sympathetic nervous system, and the parasympathetic nervous system.

When the fight-flight-freeze acute stress response happens, there is an instant cascading chain reaction of biological and complex physiological processes that follow. The amygdala responds by signalling the hypothalamus. The hypothalamus is responsible for the metabolic processes that is involved in the autonomic nervous system. This cascades to activating the pituitary gland.

The pituitary gland is often considered as being the most important part of the endocrine system because it produces hormones that control, and bring about the actions of many functions of other endocrine glands that generate an immediate release of the hormones adrenaline (epinephrine), nor-adrenaline (norepinephrine) and cortisol.

The release of adrenaline also helps to ensure that glucose is sent to all parts of the body involved in the fight-flight-freeze response. Even when the body is not moving (the 'deer frozen' in the headlights condition); the brain and body (the *hólos*) is still internally coursing with 'explosive cascading biological processes, which still needs glucose and oxygen.

### **Stress chemicals**

Associated with all of this, there is the 'explosive' cascading release of adrenocorticotrophic hormone, corticotrophin-releasing factor, and, as noted cortisol. These stress chemicals lead to a reduction in the formation of effective memory systems, which results in memory and recall inefficiencies. This also interferes with the learning process as well. This is happening because the stress

chemicals are having a negative impact on the hippocampus. The hippocampus is where memories are formed.

### **Hippocampus impairment**

This stress response "causes the hippocampus to shrink, through the release of glucocorticoids (a class of hormones), especially cortisol." The research indicates that when there is a prolonged release of cortisol, this sustained release of cortisol tends to damage and/or even destroys cells in the hippocampus, which begins to lead to memory loss and also have a significant negative impact on learning.

### **Reduction in effective and competent communication abilities**

Associated with this, there is a significant reduction in effective and competent communication abilities. The victim may not be able to talk coherently. This may suggest there is a condition of confused thinking. The victim of the bullying is now (biologically, cognitively, emotionally, psychologically, behaviourally and socially) functioning at what could only be described in a highly inefficient manner.

It is important to note is that this biological, physiological, personal and social inefficient functioning may remain in place for some time post-bullying. This could suggest that the prefrontal cortex (the executive and symbolic thinking part of the brain) has been neurologically impacted by the bullying. This is why, when a bullying situation occurs, the victims of bullying are often unable to successfully describe the occurrence, or even recall or remember what has taken place.

In relation to all of this, it is important to note that if bullying takes place, to always make this known and always seek help.

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