

My Good Name

Dennis Sleigh

In various round-table discussions with teachers and educational leaders, I have often heard two issues that scare us: the possibility of being somehow responsible for an injury to a student, and the fear of an attack on our personal reputation by someone with an axe to grind. This general reflection addresses the second, and does so from the perspective of a teacher, not a lawyer. If you do find yourself in this particular predicament, seek expert legal advice.

Reputations quickly dissolve in the acid of gossip. I pondered on that thought recently when I was told about the impact that a gossiping parent had on the life of a teacher. I knew the teacher well and was quite confident that the stories were false, but I was amazed at the speed with which the stories spread. Sadly, the destruction of reputation is a fate too often suffered by teachers if they happen to fall foul of some nasty or damaged people.

The worst case I have heard about involved a pact between two high school students to make life miserable for a PE teacher they didn't like, by reporting him as having improperly touched them. Despite his emphatic denials, they insisted they were right and the effect on the teacher was dramatic: after a very short time of fighting the accusations, he killed himself. Weeks later, the two accusers admitted they had made up the story.

A less dramatic, but perhaps more common tale, was of a teacher who had been accused of being cruel to her young students. Two students told their parents about her alleged offences, the parents reacted, and the teacher was investigated. By the time the tortuous process was concluded, and the teacher had been cleared of any criticism, the damage had been done; the victim – and that is indeed what she was, a victim – felt her name had been so tarnished that she left education forever.

These sickening tales are not the only examples of scandalous actions by small-minded people that have led to serious consequences, and often the instigator has lacked the courage to admit the truth. Sadly, their reign of terror seems to run unabated and the pile of victims mounts. What can we, as teachers, do about it?

Before looking at some answers, it is important to realise that teachers are not the only victims of such malice. The integrity of accountants, police officers, clergy, bank employees and doctors – to name a few – has for centuries been sullied by the back-stabbing tactics of others.

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Will I be protected?

The first question that arises in a teacher's mind when faced with allegations is often "What will be the attitude of my employers when they hear these claims?" It is impossible to guess every reaction, but my own experience over 45 years in schools has suggested that support is generally pretty automatic.

Whether it is at the school level, where the principal is the front person, or at system level where the usual pattern seems to be to hand it over to the appropriate officer in the Human Resources section, a teacher under attack should know that they are entitled to due process, which means that they will be informed of the claims, given a hearing, and assured that their situation will be examined free from bias.

There appears to be a trend today, however, where this support is offered without the compassion, or pastoral care, that might have been more common in the past. Perhaps systems themselves feel very much under attack because of the fairly recent imposition of child protection protocols to ensure that the safety of the student is paramount. No-one needs to be reminded that child abuse *has* happened in schools, and the measures taken to prevent it have been so strong that authorities are now

walking on egg-shells as they try to explore the real truth of any allegation.

Are you guaranteed a fair go?

It is always consoling to know that underpinning our legal system is the belief that a person is innocent until proven guilty – but sadly, reality seems somewhat different. We have all witnessed classic media 'trials' where the guilt of the person is not only assumed, but indeed it is more or less locked in because of the tremendous damage done when the media choose to present one side only of the case.

This means that a reputation can be destroyed even for an innocent person, and we have seen instances of this throughout history. Whether we have learned the 'truth' by innuendo, by claims made under parliamentary privilege, or by persecution on social media, the damage can be irreparable by the time systems swing into motion to deal with the issues. However, this situation must never be accepted as "fair enough".

Is honesty the best policy?

Another truism is that if we tell the truth, we will be safe. "The truth will set you free." It would be great if this was always the case because in



many cases, an innocent victim could offer a coherent defence and then the case would be over. Once again, reality suggests a different picture. Modern advice seems to be: say as little as possible so that no-one can later twist the true facts in a way that makes others doubt the innocent person's veracity. Material that you might think will be useful in your defence might in fact give just a hint to your opponent about another track to follow. After all, very few people can claim to be totally innocent, and even if our guilt is limited to some peripheral comment we have made in our response, the lesson is there: say only what needs to be said, not necessarily what you feel will be used for your benefit.

Note that I am not suggesting that we should lie or even 'bend the truth'. This can cause far greater damage than you might at first imagine. If there is such a thing as a 'little lie', I can assure you that it can turn out to be very big by the time a clever lawyer uses it to question our overall veracity. If, for example, we decide to omit some information about a companion in case that person becomes implicated, we might suddenly find that the other side is already aware of the companion and uses this fact to hammer us.

Should you get support?

When confronted with allegations that threaten our position – whether it be in education or in any other occupation – it might be tempting to 'keep it quiet', thinking that the fewer who know about it, the better. This certainly makes sense because it reduces the number of people who can add to our woes. However, while confidentiality is important, isolation is not. Most of us cannot face these accusations alone. Some trusted confidant, perhaps a close friend or a colleague in the union, can prove immensely valuable as we make our way through the quagmire that is developing around us.

The choice of such a companion must be

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made carefully. Not only do we want someone who will be able to be present with us in whatever situations arise – such as an official investigation, or even an informal face-to-face with your accuser – but we also need someone who can respond promptly to our phone calls and emails as the situation unfolds, someone who understands our professional obligations, and someone who can continue to offer support even when the opposition seems to be overwhelming.

Not all allegations, of course, are comparable. One parent might accuse a teacher of being rude to her in the supermarket while another might say a principal molested her child. The type of support needed will therefore vary greatly. However, it is important that, if the threat seems likely to impact on a person's job, the subject of the allegations should contact the union or professional association for additional help. If the allegations are being made by, say, a parent at school, the employer will usually support this decision to get such help.

It might also be in our interest to consult a lawyer, but this will depend on the nature of the matters being discussed. Clearly, if there is a crime involved, we would be foolish not to engage professional legal help. It is beyond the scope of this brief article – and beyond the ability of the author – to delve too deeply into this but again we can call on our union and seek their support. Employers may also offer advice about suitable legal services.

Sometimes, principals are loathe to consult their union (assuming they belong to one in the first place), claiming that the unions always act in favour of the teacher, not the principal. This suggestion has often been refuted by union officials who point out that all members have equal rights, but principals often fail to access theirs. Clearly if a teacher and a principal are at odds, and the teacher reports the issue to the union, while the principal fails to do so, the

union is going to act for the teacher. If we are in the union, we should always call on them; their help can be very significant.

Does mud stick?

One frequent concern that principals and teachers have when people gossip about them is that, even though they might be totally innocent, some of the mud will stick. While I cannot pretend that this doesn't happen, my experience has suggested that this is not as serious an issue as it first appears.

Consider the frequent allegations made against two of the most threatened groups: politicians and sports stars. While there might indeed be some spoiling of a person's image when the accusations first emerge, it seems to be human nature that they soon fade in the public's memory. Try to recall which politicians or which sport star seemed to be facing utter destruction five years ago and you might realise that memory is indeed fickle.

This does not mean you can be blasé about damage to your reputation. My point is that the damage often seems worse than it is. Most rational people will decide a case on its merits, and if the facts do emerge, these people are likely to ask themselves 'Whom would I believe?' If our behaviour has been appropriate, we will usually survive the onslaught. This might be cold comfort while we are actually undergoing the ordeal, but at least it might be enough to stop us doing anything too dramatic.

Can we stop these attacks?

The final issue I want to make is that the sort of malicious damage we see done to a person's reputation seems to be a common tragedy. Perhaps the media and politicians could work out between them who is to blame for this increase in disrespect for the rights of the individual but regardless of the cause, one thing is clear: while no-one is immune from attack, the best defence is to lead a blameless life. If we cannot quite make that standard (and who can?), let's just remember that we can be our own worst enemy by giving people ammunition to shoot us. If we act in a way that brings shame on ourselves, then we must expect to be shamed. If we act as true professionals, we can usually work through these attacks, and in the end, it is our accuser who will be revealed as the person with the problem.

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