

## Teachers' Perspectives on Principal Mistreatment

By Joseph Blase & Jo Blase

I dropped a hint to the school accreditation reviewer that all is not well in Camelot. The next day at a faculty meeting, the principal said that something had occurred that was a cloud on our whole school. She said that the reviewer heard that everything they would see at the school was a sham. She reminded us that if we dared speak up about anything that was negative about the school, it was grounds for dismissal. The principal said, "How can a Judas betray us like this?!" She said she would contact the three teachers on the review committee and get them to tell her who it was. Her final words were, "I want all of you to work to find out who this traitor is!" The next day she called an emergency faculty meeting, expecting someone is going to cave in and confess. . . . At the beginning and at the end of every faculty meeting, she said she did not get mad, she got even. People learned real quick that if you did talk, there were repercussions.

This article is based on a larger qualitative study of school principals' long-term mistreatment/abuse of teachers (teachers in our study used both terms synonymously) and the harmful consequences for them, from teachers' perspectives. A full discussion of our findings and how to deal with the principal mistreatment problem can be found in our book, *Breaking the Silence: Overcoming the Problem of Principal Mistreatment of Teachers* (Blase & Blase, 2003).

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**Terms and Constructs**

Internationally, a substantial body of research addressing the problem of workplace abuse (excluding physical violence) has been produced by organizational scholars, particularly in Europe, Australia, and South Africa. Concurrently, extensive legislation against workplace abuse has emerged in these countries (Björkvist, Österman, & Hjelt-Black, 1994; Davenport, Schwartz, & Elliott, 1999; Keashly, 1998; Namie & Namie, 2000). In the United States, research on this problem has come more slowly; however, the emerging literature suggests that workplace abuse may lead to seriously harmful outcomes for victimized employees and organizations (Baron & Neuman, 1996; Davenport et al., 1999; Hornstein, 1996; Hornstein, Michela, Van Eron, Cohen, Heckelman, Sachse-Skidd, & Spenser, 1995; Keashly, 1998; Keashly et al., 1994).

Nationally and internationally, researchers have produced a host of conceptual lenses describing the workplace mistreatment/abuse phenomenon including *incivility* (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), *mobbing* (Davenport et al., 1999; Leymann, 1990), *bullying* (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Namie & Namie, 2000), *harassment* (Björkvist et al., 1994), *petty tyranny* (Ashforth, 1994), *abusive disrespect* (Hornstein, 1996), *interactional injustice* (Harlos & Pinder, 2000), *emotional abuse* (Keashly, 1998), *mistreatment* (Folger, 1993; Price-Spratlen, 1995), *abuse* (Bassman, 1992), *aggression* (Neuman & Baron, 1998), *deviance* (Robinson & Bennett, 1995), and *victimization* (Swedish National Board of Occupational Safety and Health, 1993). From a comprehensive review of the workplace mistreatment/abuse literature, Keashly (1998) developed the concept of *emotional abuse* that subsumes elements of the constructs defined above. Emotional abuse is the hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors directed at gaining compliance from others (p. 85). Keashly states that individuals will tend to define a superior's behavior as abusive if there is a pattern of abuse (not a single event), behaviors that are *unwanted* by the target, behaviors that *violate norms* for appropriate conduct or an individual's rights, behaviors that are *intended to harm* the target, behaviors that *result in harm* to the target, and *power differences* between the abuser and the target of abuse. We found that Keashly's concept of emotional abuse is consistent with the perspectives of the teachers who participated in our study.

**Studies of Workplace Mistreatment/Abuse**

Empirical studies of workplace abuse disclose a wide range of nonverbal and verbal behaviors. Some examples of *nonverbal behaviors* are aggressive eye contact (e.g., staring, "dirty looks"), snubbing or ignoring ("the silent treatment"), and physical gestures (e.g., violations of physical space, finger pointing, slamming objects, and throwing objects). Examples of *verbal behaviors* include sexual harassment, angry outbursts, yelling and screaming, put downs, lying, public humiliation, threats of job loss, name calling, excessive or unfounded criticism of work abilities or personal life, unreasonable job demands, stealing credit for

another's work, blaming, exclusion or isolation, initiating malicious rumors and gossip, withholding resources or obstructing opportunities, favoritism, dismissing an individual's feelings or thoughts, unfriendly behavior, not returning phone calls, and behavior that implies a master-servant relationship (Björkvist et al., 1994; Davenport et al., 1991; Harlos & Pinder, 2000; Hornstein, 1996; Keashly et al., 1994; Leymann, 1990; Lombardo & McCall, 1984; Namie, 2000; Namie & Namie, 2000; Neuman & Baron, 1998; Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Ryan & Oestreich, 1991).

Abuse in work settings is associated with a variety of deleterious outcomes for an individual's physical well-being, psychological/emotional well-being, work performance, and social relationships. Outcomes related to *physical well-being* include sleep disorders (e.g., nightmares or insufficient rest), headaches, backaches, fatigue/exhaustion, illness, hyperactivity, weight changes (e.g., significant increases or decreases), irritable bowel syndrome, heart arrhythmia, skin changes, ulcers, substance abuse (first time use), and suicide. Examples of *psychological/emotional outcomes* of abusive workplace behavior are depression, anger, rage, helplessness, powerlessness, cynicism and distrust, self-doubt, guilt, shame, embarrassment, insecurity, disillusionment, poor concentration, lowered self-esteem, aggression or revenge, hypervigilance, panic attacks, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Harmful outcomes on *work performance* related to abusive behavior include reductions in job effort, commitment, satisfaction, and morale plus increases in absenteeism, turnover, and attrition. *Social effects* noted in the literature are isolation and loss of friendships (Björkvist et al., 1994; Davenport et al., 1999; Harlos & Pinder, 2000; Hornstein, 1996; Keashly et al., 1994; Leymann, 1990; Lombardo & McCall, 1984; Namie, 2000; Namie & Namie, 2000; Pearson, 2000; NNLI, 1993; Ryan & Oestreich, 1991).

More specifically, examination of the research on abusive bosses has revealed a number of troubling findings: abusive conduct by bosses is commonplace in nonprofit and profit organizations; bosses are more typically workplace abusers, instead of an individual's coworkers; bosses have been described as exhibiting abusive conduct toward subordinates between 54% of the time and 90% of the time (Björkvist et al., 1994; Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Hornstein, 1996; Keashly et al., 1994; Namie, 2000; Namie & Namie, 2000; NNLI, 1993; Pearson, 2000; Rayner, 1998); male and female bosses are equally likely to engage in abusive conduct (Keashly et al., 1994; Harlos & Pinder, 2000), although abusive male bosses tend to more frequently use explosive behaviors, as compared to abusive female bosses (e.g., Harlos & Pinder, 2000); and women are targeted significantly more frequently, compared to males (Björkvist et al., 1994, CAWB, 2000). Lastly, research on abusive bosses indicates that individuals targeted for this type of abuse rarely have efficacious opportunities for redress. Research demonstrates that as a result of organizational culture (e.g., a *macho culture*) and off-putting management practices (e.g., a cavalier attitude about abuse, attempts to justify abusive conduct), victims' complaints about abusive bosses usually yield (a) no action (i.e., no

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response) from upper-level management/administration and departments of human resources, (b) efforts to protect an abusive boss, and/or (c) reprisals against the victim for registering complaints (Bassman, 1992; Davenport et al., 1999; Hornstein, 1996; Keashly, 1998; Keashly et al., 1994; Leymann, 1990; Namie, 2000; Namie & Namie, 2000; Pearson, 2000; Rayner, 1998).

#### ***Theoretical Framework: Symbolic Interactionism***

Although there is some important scholarly work on the problem of workplace mistreatment/abuse, theoretical or empirical work on abusive school principals is nonexistent. Symbolic interactionism was the theoretical structure for the present study. This perspective on social research is founded on three primary assumptions: (1) individuals act toward things and people on the basis of the meanings that things have for them; (2) the meaning of such things are derived from, or arise out of, the social interaction that individuals have with one another; (3) these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by individuals to deal with the things and other people they encounter (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934).

Consistent with the Blumer-Mead (1969, 1934) approach, the present study employed an open-ended theoretical and methodological perspective designed to focus on the meanings teachers constructed from long-term mistreatment/abuse experiences with school principals. The purpose was to create a substantive model of principal mistreatment/abuse behaviors and effects, that is, an inductively-derived model constructed entirely from the empirical world under investigation. No a priori definitions of principal abuse were used to control data collection; such an approach would have limited teachers' freedom to discuss their personal views and experiences of principal mistreatment (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

#### **The Study**

Our study focused on the broad question: How do teachers experience significant long-term mistreatment (abuse) by a school principal? What effect does such conduct have on teachers, teaching, and learning? These are some of the basic questions we used in our study to examine teachers' perspectives of principal mistreatment.

We used a snowball sampling technique that required teachers and professors throughout the United States to identify individuals whom they knew had experienced long-term principal abuse; this technique is common in grounded theory research that seeks to maximize variation in the database (Glaser, 1978, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). We contacted (by telephone) teachers who had expressed an interest in participation, explained our study, addressed questions and concerns, discussed our backgrounds, and generally got to know the teacher. Only teachers who had experienced long-term and significant abuse (i.e., 6 months to 9 years) by their school principal were included in our study.

As expected, teachers were very fearful of possible disclosure; therefore, several safeguards were used to alleviate their fears and promote trust and rapport. We explained to teachers that their identities would remain anonymous. Teachers were informed, per our agreement with the Human Subjects Committee at our university, that our entire database (i.e., audiotapes, typed transcripts, official and personal documents, and other related materials) would be destroyed upon completion of our analysis. We also indicated that all identifiers (including teachers' gender and grade level) would be redacted from any materials used in any presentation of our findings. This, of course, required using pseudonyms for the names of people and places. Finally, we shared our general research questions and asked teachers to think about their abuse experience in preparation for the next interview.

Our sample consisted of male ( $n = 5$ ) and female ( $n = 45$ ) teachers from rural ( $n = 14$ ), suburban ( $n = 25$ ), and urban ( $n = 11$ ) school locations. Elementary ( $n = 26$ ), middle/junior high ( $n = 10$ ), and high school ( $n = 14$ ) teachers participated. The average age of teachers was 42; the average number of years in teaching was 16. The sample included tenured ( $n = 44$ ) and non-tenured ( $n = 6$ ), married ( $n = 34$ ) and single ( $n = 16$ ) teachers. Degrees earned by these teachers included B.A./B.S. ( $n = 7$ ), M.Ed./MA ( $n = 31$ ), Ed.S. ( $n = 11$ ), and Ph.D. ( $n = 1$ ). The mean number of years working with the abusive principal was 4. Forty-nine teachers resided in the United States and one resided in Canada. Fifteen of the teachers we studied were with an abusive principal at the time of this study; most others had experienced abuse in recent years. In total, these teachers described 28 male and 22 female abusive principals.

Examination of the personal and official documents (e.g., teacher journals, teacher evaluations, written reprimands, transfers) submitted to us and reports from those who had worked with and referred us to the veteran teachers we studied suggest that the teachers were highly respected, accomplished, creative, and dedicated individuals. In most cases, they had been consistently and formally recognized by their school and district not simply as effective teachers but also as superior teachers; in many cases, such recognition for their exceptional achievements as public educators extended to state levels.

We conducted between two and four in-depth structured and semistructured telephone interviews with each of our research participants. In total, 135 hours of interviews were completed. The personal and official documents we collected were used, in part, to confirm the credibility of teachers' interview data as well as their overall effectiveness as teachers. In addition, we used a variety of techniques to determine the trustworthiness and reliability of teachers' reports; for example, we used no a priori concepts to direct data collection, audio recorded all interviews, conducted several interviews with participants, probed for details on all responses, examined data for consistencies and inconsistencies within and between interviews, searched for negative cases, compared personal documents with interview transcriptions, produced low-inference descriptors, and examined data for re-

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researcher effects (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

All of the findings discussed herein, drawn directly from our data, focus on teachers' perspectives on principal abuse and its adverse effects. Individual profiles of principals and teachers are not presented. Thus, it is important to note that each principal identified by individual teachers engaged in a range of abusive behaviors described in this article, and each teacher, supervised by such a principal, experienced most of the major categories of deleterious effects we describe. It is also important to note that our study, being exploratory in nature, did not indicate the pervasiveness of the mistreatment problem in the United States. Given space limitations, only very brief descriptions of our findings are presented.

### **Findings: A Model of Principal Mistreatment**

When I came back one day after lunch, the warehouse people had axed the reading loft [on the principal's orders]. . . . This was only the beginning. . . . He stripped away everything that made my room unique, that makes teachers special, sets one teacher apart from another. A package that says to children here I am, examine me, question me, shake, rattle, and roll me and I will open up for you and reveal everything. What happens when a teacher is stripped of her style, when, year after year, her brightly colored package is picked at? Off come the ribbons, the bows, the brightly colored paper. What is left is a shell, an empty box. I was a teacher who had a special style of teaching. But everything that made me special has been done away with. . . . I have lost so much of myself. The more bookwork, page work, and blackboard work that I do, the less alive the students see; I can see a change. The light went out of their eyes. I was told I needed to control them rather than make learning a joint venture. I became a teaching box filling up heads with information so that they could pass the test. . . . I want out. (A veteran teacher)

The principal behaviors drawn from our data have been organized according to level of aggression: Level 1 Principal Mistreatment (indirect, moderately aggressive), Level 2 Principal Mistreatment (direct, escalating aggression), and Level 3 Principal Mistreatment (direct, severely aggressive) (see Figure 1). Please note, we do not suggest that individual Level 1 principal mistreatment behaviors always produced less harm to teachers when compared to Level 2 or Level 3 behaviors; in point of fact, as one would expect, the degree of harm related to any single aggressive behavior varied from one victimized teacher to another. Moreover, because we studied long-term mistreatment (6 months to 9 years), teachers discussed the cumulative effects of their principals' continued, systematic mistreatment/abuse.

#### ***Level 1 Principal Mistreatment: Indirect and Moderately Aggressive***

Indirect forms of principal mistreatment, as described by teachers in our study, included nonverbal and verbal principal behaviors. This category of principal behaviors was considered generally less abusive as compared to Level 2 and Level

3 behaviors, and this finding is consistent with studies conducted with the general workplace population (e.g., Keashly et al., 1994; Neuman & Baron, 1998; Ryan & Oestreich, 1991). Such behaviors were always a part of a more extensive pattern of mistreatment/abuse. Level 1 behaviors discussed by teachers were:

- ◆ *Discounting teachers' thoughts, needs, and feelings*: Principals ignored and snubbed teachers, exhibited insensitivity to personal matters (e.g., death in the teacher's family), and engaged in stonewalling (e.g., failed to respond to written requests).
- ◆ *Nonsupport of teachers*: Abusive principals failed to support teachers in conflicts with students and/or parents, were "shamelessly unfair," failed to investigate problems, blamed teachers for problems, and frequently reprimanded teachers for problems in the presence of students and/or parents.
- ◆ *Withholding resources and denying opportunities and credit*: Principals unfairly withheld needed instructional resources, denied teachers opportunities for professional development (e.g., to attend conferences), and took credit for teachers' accomplishments (e.g., grant proposals).
- ◆ *Favoritism*: Principals routinely rewarded select faculty and punished and/or neglected other faculty.
- ◆ *Unprofessional personal conduct*: Some principals had affairs with other teachers and pursued personal interests during the school day (e.g., working on one's car).

### ***Level 2 Principal Mistreatment: Direct and Escalating Aggression***

This section identifies some of the direct and escalating aggressive forms of mistreatment analyzed from our data. Level 2 Principal Mistreatment Behaviors included:

- ◆ *Spying*: Principals monitored teachers by situating themselves near classroom doorways, listening in on classes via the intercom, and soliciting the services of "favored" teachers and/or parents as informants.
- ◆ *Sabotaging*: Principals manipulated other faculty to undermine teacher efforts designed to benefit students or colleagues (e.g., directed other teachers not to help targeted teachers).
- ◆ *Stealing*: Principals were accused of stealing teachers' items (e.g., journals, food, equipment).
- ◆ *Destroying teachers' instructional aids*: Some principals literally destroyed instructional aids (e.g., reading lofts) or ordered them removed from classrooms.
- ◆ *Making unreasonable demands*: Principals overloaded teachers with extra work responsibilities; in several cases, principals forced teachers to do their (the principals') work.
- ◆ *Criticism*: Principals routinely and unfairly criticized teachers both privately and



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publicly for a wide range of reasons. Criticism was often associated with strong negative affect (e.g., yelling, pounding the desk). Public criticism of teachers occurred in the presence of others in the front office areas, in hallways, in classrooms, in the lunchroom, and the school parking lot.

#### ***Level 3 Principal Mistreatment: Direct and Severely Aggressive***

From the foregoing, it is apparent that principals who abuse teachers do so in a variety of verbal and nonverbal ways and that such abuse includes Level 1 (indirect, moderately aggressive) and Level 2 (direct, escalating aggression) Principal Mistreatment Behaviors. As devastating as these levels of mistreatment are for teachers, principal mistreatment includes even more aggressive and severe forms of abuse: Level 3 Principal Mistreatment Behaviors, glimpses of which have been foreshadowed in Level 2 behaviors.

According to our data, victimized teachers believed that most of the principals they described intended to harm and even destroy them and that many such principals were quite aware of the damage they caused. For instance, most principals failed to investigate issues before attacking the teacher. And, when teachers confronted abusive principals about their conduct and its destructive effects on them, such principals typically denied all allegations, blamed the teacher, and engaged in further reprisals against them. Most Level 3 forms of principal mistreatment were strongly associated with various forms of deception and included:

- ◆ *Lying*: Principals were accused of blatant lying, that is, repeatedly making statements that conflicted with the teachers' direct experiences. This form of abuse was commonly associated with principals' nonsupport of teachers in conflict with students and/or parents and with unfounded criticism, among other things.
- ◆ *Explosive behavior*: During face-to-face interaction with teachers, many principals engaged in loud verbal abuse (e.g., yelling) and negative affect (e.g., pounding fists on a table).
- ◆ *Threats*: Principals directly threatened individuals and groups of teachers to change students' grades, for example; they also threatened teachers for expressing opinions contrary to the principals' opinions; and for confronting a principal for his/her abusive conduct.
- ◆ *Unwarranted written reprimands*: Some principals wrote [teachers] up for almost anything, including conduct toward students, a stolen video camera, and going into a storage closet when there was no wrongdoing by teachers.
- ◆ *Unfair evaluations*: In all cases, teachers worked in school districts that required that principals complete objective teacher evaluations. According to teachers, abusive principals typically included flagrantly false information on their evaluations. It should be mentioned that, with the exception of beginning teachers, all but one experienced teacher had received superior evaluations from principals before mistreatment began.



- ◆ *Mistreating students*: Principals who mistreated students engaged in name-calling, racism, and even physical abuse of students, particularly special education students who the principals described as "misbehaving."
- ◆ *Forcing teachers out of their jobs*: Abusive principals engaged in a variety of unfair actions against teachers such as unilateral reassignments, transfers, and termination.
- ◆ *Preventing teachers from leaving*: Some principals obstructed teachers' attempts to leave a school by failing to forward applications (within a district) and writing negative letters of reference.
- ◆ *Sexual harassment*: Several female teachers accused their principals of ongoing, long-term sexual harassment. Teachers viewed the principals' sexual harassment as obvious assertions of power and control.
- ◆ *Racism*: Teachers defined six principals, three Caucasians and three African Americans, as racists.

### **The Effect of Mistreatment: Damaged Schools**

There is a very strong culture of fear and caution. You best keep your head down, say as little as possible, and stay away from the front office. A teacher told me, "If you try to make any changes around here you will be her victim. Every year she has at least one and as many as three or four, maybe five or six people, whom she victimizes in order to demonstrate her power and control." I had bad dreams about it. If I was called to the office my heart would absolutely race. . . . it takes a lot to stick your neck out. Most teachers simply stop championing new creative ideas because the reward is punishment. It is a pretty deep culture of fear. The self is at risk when you are trying to do your thing. (Victimized teacher)

As one might expect, we found that principals' mistreatment resulted in far-reaching, destructive effects on teachers psychologically/emotionally (e.g., shock and disorientation, humiliation, loneliness, self-doubt, lowered self-esteem, fear, anger, and post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD]) and physically/physiologically (e.g., chronic sleep disorders, chronic fatigue, stomach aches, headaches and migraines, nausea, weight gain, neck and back pain, diarrhea, heart palpitations, auditory impairment, and blurred vision). In turn, such effects had further negative consequences for (a) relationships between and among teachers, (b) collective decision-making processes, and (c) teachers' instructional work in classrooms. We describe these consequences in greater detail below.

#### ***Damaged Relationships***

Interestingly, most of the experienced teachers we interviewed reported that throughout their professional careers and in their work with former principals, they had been totally involved in their schools, and, in fact, frequently provided the leadership necessary to initiate innovative arrangements among faculty focusing on student development. Our data demonstrate that abusive principals severely

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undermined the development of innovative and collaborative structures among faculty as well as teachers' overall level of involvement in their schools. As a result, mistreated teachers typically withdrew from most discretionary involvements such as committee work, school-wide events, special projects, and staff development. When involvement was considered mandatory, such as faculty meeting attendance, teachers minimized their participation and, in general, maintained silence. Briefly, teachers indicated that such extreme responses on their part were designed to protect themselves from further attacks by abusive principals. These teachers became islands; support from others was limited and was often given only secretly because, as one teacher stated, "friends were afraid that they could become a target of mistreatment, guilt by association."

There were a lot of little cliques. There was no sharing among the faculty, no sharing of ideas or methods, no getting together and looking at students or doing assessments, none of that. Committees were few and far between and generally composed of her little pets. That is how all decisions were made. No one else wanted to be on the committees under these circumstances. . . . I spent a lot of time on the phone with a really good friend. . . . She and I would make popcorn and just talk. Sometimes I would cry.

Teachers stopped saying good morning and started being real short. . . . At holiday parties, attendance was extremely low. . . . Trust suffered. Even I was finding fault. I was short with certain people whom normally I could have fluffed off. Where normally most people would give and take, everything became like a life or death situation. Everything was negative. When you get a totally negative feeling at the top, by the time that you get down to the teachers, kids, and parents, it is pretty bad. I felt very, very sad a lot of times because of what was happening to our school.

The extent to which many teachers withdrew from former social and professional commitments is noteworthy:

I withdrew from all professional organizations, except two. I closed myself down. Before all this [abuse] started, I was the State Teacher of the Year. I truly enjoyed teaching. I loved it. I thought that I would teach forever. I have always believed that we need to put a lot into our profession—that we need to work extra with other teachers and students. Before, I sponsored the science club, academic debates, the scholars bowl team, and students against driving drunk. I was senior class sponsor; I sponsored all four committees [for the class] at the school and county level. . . . I just withdrew from all of that. I was not going to put time and effort into a system that treated me that way.

I stopped doing most everything. I used to be on leadership teams, task forces, grade chair, the climate committee. . . . I did celebrations, action research, conference presentations, school improvement. I am less open now, and my door is closed quite often. I am guarded and I am careful about what I say, always.

In addition, repeated attacks and reprisals against teachers appeared, at times, to be a function of favored teachers, teachers who served as informants or spies for

principals. Thus, abused teachers were typically alienated from others, their relationships damaged, and they had to rely on the social-emotional and professional support of only a handful of trusted colleagues. However, our data also point out that principal mistreatment, particularly when it was widespread in the school (i.e., when teachers in general were abused), occasionally resulted in greater social cohesion among faculty; such cohesion, though, was usually limited to a defensive banding together, for social-emotional support and protection.

When teachers got together, they would share their complaints, get angry and share frustrations. It became a gripe session. It was constant dialogue between teachers about things that she had done, said, or didn't do. We would turn to each other for leadership because we didn't have a principal who helped us.

I was not the only one she raked over the coals. I found out it was a kind of initiation. Once you have been talked to, in that fashion, you are part of the club. It made us very cohesive. We all had been abused, so we could empathize. When we needed stuff or support, we would go to each other. We had all been wrongfully accused, or chewed out, or were made the scapegoat. Even the people who had her ear knew that they were in a precarious situation. They would talk to both sides. We had their trust; there was nobody who was totally her person. We weren't afraid of each other in any way.

Damaged relationships in the school were discussed by all of the teachers who participated in our study.

#### ***Impaired Decision Making Processes***

Typically, teachers used words such as 'autocrat,' 'tyrant,' 'dictator,' 'authoritarian,' 'despot,' and 'control freak' to describe the leadership approach of abusive principals. Our data suggest that, with regard to school governance and decision-making, principals were overtly authoritarian-abusive or covertly authoritarian-abusive; in both cases, abusive principals were extremely coercive and control-oriented, and they made decisions unilaterally and, often, arbitrarily. Further, in both cases, communication was one-way and intimidation was used to secure teachers' compliance to decisions and decision-making processes. However, principals who used an overt approach to school-wide governance frequently employed a direct, 'in-your-face,' 'make-my-day' approach to leadership; whereas, those who employed a covert approach often appropriated the rhetoric and/or the veneer of 'shared decision making and collaboration' to obscure its authoritarian nature. Thus, the latter form of authoritarianism is considered more manipulative (i.e., deceptive) as compared to the former. Teachers' comments illustrate how overtly authoritarian-abusive principals approached faculty meetings and school-wide decision making.

At faculty meetings, he believes only one voice should be heard, his. He thinks that he is a people person because he can make almost seventy people sit there and face him . . . no one else speaksóhe just keeps talking . . . one or two people . . . will ask

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questions, and he is brutal with them. He'll say, 'I am not going to talk with you about that now.' If you ask a question and he doesn't want to deal with it, he just cuts you off. One time, I asked a question at a meeting. He said, 'I don't appreciate being questioned and, if you have anything to say during a faculty meeting, don't!' One time he went through almost a 100 pages of 'You don't do this . . . don't you ever!' I mean it! . . . Faculty meetings usually go on for over an hour and nobody else speaks.

You don't ask the principal anything, because he is just going to yell. If he knows the answer, he is not going to tell you. Faculty meetings were crazy; they didn't accomplish anything. He would read a typed written agenda to us; it was just a joke. If you said something and he didn't agree with it, then he would respond, 'Did you understand what I said? Well, we are going to do it this way, because I am the principal.' We just sat there and wrote notes like, 'Can you believe we are sitting here?'

Teachers also described overtly authoritarian-abusive principals' approach to faculty committees.

Committee members were appointed by her based on whom she liked and whom she didn't like: favoritism. She ran some of the committees. She just told you what to do; she didn't participate. We knew that you couldn't do anything to the contrary of what she would want, so the meetings went something like, 'What do you think she wants us to do? Okay, let's do that.' She had her spies. There was no way to discuss anything. There was no professional discussion. Everything was an order, and you just followed it and hoped to dodge criticism.

As mentioned earlier, all abusive principals used thinly-veiled manipulative techniques to control teachers, such as negative comments ('We have done that before, it won't work') and pejorative labeling ('You are just a "negative" person'), vetoing faculty decisions, inviting dissenting faculty to 'private' meetings, limiting time, and limiting agendas to particular topics to control faculty. However, as suggested above, covertly authoritarian-abusive principals attempted to maintain a veneer of shared decision making:

She decided to have this big 'democratic' procedure but decisions were predetermined, you know. We were supposed to come to a consensus, but everybody was afraid to voice their opinions. The principal would call a meeting, and sometimes it would start at 2:45 and not be over until 5:30 or 6:00. There was never any warning that we were going to have a meeting, or how long it might last. She would stand up in front of the whole cafeteria full of people and read 'her' agenda. You would be quiet and then you would leave. When the accreditation team came, I signed up to be on the communication committee. Lo and behold, guess who was chairman of that committee? The principal. She came to the meeting and said, 'This isn't going to be long at all. It is going to be a piece of cake. I jotted a few things down on this paper. If you would like to proofread and see if there is anything that you want to change or add, we will be out of here in 10 minutes.' What person was going to fight her? So, we all read it nodded our heads, signed off, and left.

On paper we had shared governance, but it lasted only a week or two. Adminis-

trators figured out that it would look good to pretend that we were doing it. They set up this committee with three teachers to represent all the teachers, and they met every three weeks. Everything that got taken to them—all of the issues—were slapped right back down. Finally, everybody just gave up because it didn't matter. "What are we doing this for?"

All 50 of the teachers interviewed indicated that their principals' conduct toward them significantly impaired decision making in the school.

### ***Damaged Classrooms***

For most teachers, principal mistreatment had serious deleterious consequences for all major aspects of classroom life including the quality of instruction and social relationships with students. In general, teachers described feelings of "stress," "paranoia," "insecurity," "fear," "dread," "self-doubt," and lowered motivation with regard to classroom teaching:

My emphases and my thoughts went away from the curriculum as I wondered where the principal was. I was paranoid. Was he coming to my class, what was going on? . . . I have avoided new ideas that I would have implemented in class because they would have involved the principal's support. I felt vulnerable. I knew the principal would not back me. My relationship with students became stressed.

More precisely, teachers disclosed that abusive principals forced them to employ traditional methods of teaching that they viewed as "rigid," "authoritarian," "dated," and "ineffective." Such methods emphasized lecture, rote and recitation, drill, and worksheets, and were associated with significant reductions in teachers' motivation, responsiveness to diversity, risk-taking, creativity and innovation, planning, preparation, and variation in the use of instructional strategies and materials. Furthermore, teachers described the increased use of authoritarian, control-oriented, "impersonal" methods of classroom discipline, an expectation of most abusive principals. Important adverse effects were also discussed for teachers' social relationships with students; reductions in teacher caring, patience, tolerance, and humor were apparent:

I was less motivated to try new things or even ask for advice on how to implement a new instructional unit and methods in my classroom. I was constantly angry at the students. . . . I had to internalize my anger to prevent trouble from students or parents because I knew that the principal would not support me. My authority in the classroom had been undermined; so I was very uncomfortable about how to deal with the students and the class. I did not try as hard or put forth the effort toward my classroom duties. Every teacher was guarded in the classroom and in discussions and conferences with parents. Eventually, coming to school and to class was a dreaded event. When I received letters of reprimand during class, my students witnessed my reaction. I was not able to teach effectively at all. At first, I tried to ignore the negative environment, but eventually I became withdrawn. I taught straight from the book. I put in as little time as possible. I didn't get very close to the students. My motivation for teaching

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became zero. I was constantly on edge. My nerves were shot and I would sometimes treat students in a negative manner because of the principal's abuse.

In my teaching, I was hesitant to try anything new. I didn't do anything different that would draw attention to me, especially anything that might not work the first time. . . . I have passed kids who failed just to avoid conflict with the principal. . . . In a strange way, I almost started treating children like he was treating me. I never berated them, but, when I would give directions, if a kid would ask about it, I would say, "You know what I just said!" I had no patience. I felt like I had to control the environment because, if I didn't, he would get me. I had kids with bracelets on their ankles, kids out of mental institutions and jails. They needed special service referrals. But I knew I couldn't do anything to set the students up for a referral, because the principal looked at that very negatively. Everything had to look good.

Special education teachers subjected to mistreatment discussed similar as well as unique problems.

I have abandoned my students completely. I am on the front lines. I am fighting for my livelihood. There will be no further teaching, advocating nothing. The kids will just have to fend for themselves. I hate that. This principal said he would like it just fine if all the teachers put in their eight hours and left. He doesn't want teachers doing anything innovative. There is no way to fight City Hall. No matter what I do, it is wrong; it could have been done sooner, it could have been done faster, it shouldn't have been done at all, it could have been done in a better way. I have lost interest in what I am doing. . . . I have become very strict with kids and much less tolerant because if they did something wrong, I would get the heat.

She said, "This is not a life skill," and, "You are not supposed to be doing that kind of thing!" She just didn't understand the program. But, in my program, my students jumped two or three grade levels in their academic subjects. She wanted to keep the worst-behaved students in the world buried somewhere out of her hair.

She said that she saw an alarming trend of special education students being dismissed or having their time decreased. I said, "I thought that was my job." She told me that my role was to teach kids coping strategies, and that she felt that if the kids were once identified as LD, they were probably always LD. She said, "We aren't in the business of curing kids at this school." She controlled all student placement meetings. I was not sleeping well, and I was generally on edge. It affected my energy for teaching, my ability to concentrate, and my planning. I did a lot less preparation.

Of the 50 teachers we interviewed, only one reported no direct adverse effects on his/her classroom.

Surprisingly, he didn't seem to have a great impact on my teaching; I would just block it out. I treated my children with kindness and caring. It wasn't kick-the-dog syndrome. I didn't have any displaced anger, but I never invited him to observe or participate with my class. I don't want him near me. I don't talk to him unnecessarily, and I don't share positive or negative things that occur in my classroom. I basically "kicked him out of my school day."

#### ***Additional Findings: Gender Differences***

Our data indicated three gender differences related to abusive principals and two gender differences related to victimized teachers; these differences are consistent with those produced by the general research on workplace mistreatment. First, male principals tended to use explosive verbal and nonverbal behaviors (i.e., yelling in public and pounding their fists on tables) more often than female principals. Second, only male principals were accused of sexual harassment. Third, only male principals were identified with offensive personal conduct (e.g., having affairs).

With respect to the victims of mistreatment, we found that female teachers engaged in severe self-doubt and self-blame during the initial stages of their mistreatment experience; males did so to a much lesser extent. Such mistreatment damaged the women's self-confidence and ability to perform in addition to damaging them in ways directly related to the mistreatment/abuse. Second, no male teacher reported crying during his mistreatment experience, while most female teachers reported crying frequently during their mistreatment experiences; indeed, many of the female teachers cried during the interviews conducted for this study as they discussed the details of their mistreatment experiences.

### **Implications for Teacher Educators and Research**

We now have an already ample and still growing body of research demonstrating the very harmful effects of workplace bullying on targets and employers alike. They sometimes are called *bullies*, *tyrants*, or *jerks*. However, regardless of how they are described (usually out of earshot), bosses and others who inflict psychological abuse on their coworkers constitute one of the most common and serious problems facing employees in today's workplace. (Yamada, 2000, pp. 477, 536)

Generally, we found that abusive principals, when compared to abusive bosses, exhibit similar behaviors (e.g., discounting teachers' needs, withholding resources, sabotaging and criticizing teachers, making unreasonable demands, threatening teachers, giving unwarranted reprimands, forcing teachers out of their jobs); like workers described in the scientific literature, abused teachers experienced the same devastating effects. In fact, the effects of such abuse are very harmful to teachers' professional and personal lives. Although we found that principal mistreatment resulted in shock, disorientation, humiliation, loneliness, injured self-esteem, chronic fear, anxiety, anger, depression, and a range of physical/physiological problems (Blase & Blase, 2003), this article has emphasized adverse outcomes for relationships among faculty, school-wide decision making, and classroom instruction.

Clearly, overcoming the problem of principal mistreatment/abuse of teachers and preventing the devastating effects it has on teachers' relationships, school wide decision making, and classroom instruction is a challenge that educators must face. Implications of our findings for teacher education and research are described below.



*Implications for Teacher Educators*

Teacher educators in university-based teacher preparation programs typically emphasize only the positive aspects of and approaches to teaching; seldom do they address the dark side of school life. In effect, such programs typically fail to equip aspiring and practicing teachers with an understanding of or knowledge about how to handle the problem of principal mistreatment (Hodgkinson, 1991). Although we recognize that teacher educators deal with an alarmingly overloaded curriculum in preparation programs, our study demonstrates the crucial role that teacher educators can fill to combat abuse of teachers:

- ◆ Teacher educators should help prospective and practicing teachers recognize and understand the potential effects of principal mistreatment on themselves, their peers, school-wide decision making, and classroom instruction; such knowledge and skills can be developed in individual, small-group, and large-group study and discussion of current related literature.
- ◆ Because the effects of principal mistreatment have been shown to have serious, widespread, negative effects, teacher educators should train teachers in the use of action research to determine the effectiveness of their classroom instruction, collaborative work, and school-wide decision-making.
- ◆ Teacher educators should also help prospective and practicing teachers gain knowledge and develop skills for assertively protecting themselves, professionally and personally, in the event they become victims of principal mistreatment. This may include learning techniques to address psychological/emotional aspects of abuse as well as assistance in creating new approaches to interaction with an abuser. Inner work, for example, includes developing self-knowledge (one's strengths and weaknesses, problem-solving abilities, and perspective on mistreatment). This self-knowledge, in concert with specific skills (e.g., maintaining one's self-esteem, dealing with the emotions of bullying such as anger and fear) and a knowledge of a variety of approaches to interaction with an abusive principal (e.g., being assertive, using I-messages, ensuring that requests are specific, filing complaints, and objectively presenting one's case) can dramatically increase a teacher's ability to deal with principal mistreatment.
- ◆ Teacher educators should encourage teachers to be supportive of colleagues whose mistreatment they witness, including being willing to confront mistreatment on their colleagues' behalf; this is especially true of experienced teachers who witness principal mistreatment of new or inexperienced teachers.
- ◆ With respect to the larger professional picture, teacher educators can

also help teachers learn how to work with their local, state, and national associations to lobby district personnel and their state legislature to enact anti-abuse policies.

◆ Workplace bullying is typically viewed as an interactive phenomenon, that is, a function of the relationships among the abuser, the abused, and a myriad of organizational factors (e.g., policies, norms, expectations, pressures, professional ethics, and codes of conduct). Specifically, teacher educators should help teachers build knowledge about how such factors contribute to the problem of abuse.

### ***Implications for Research***

This study is the first empirical report of the actual experiences of abused teachers, that is, what constitutes principal mistreatment and some of its common effects on teachers' work. Yet, although we have begun to illuminate this problem, it nevertheless requires much more investigation. For example, studies of victimized teachers' coping skills would be helpful. Quantitative studies using random samples of teachers are critical to understanding the pervasiveness of the principal mistreatment problem; qualitative studies can provide descriptions beyond those provided here (i.e., beyond forms of abuse, effects, and how abuse is perceived by victims) to include how and under what contextual conditions abusive relationships evolve, victims' interpretations of abusive principals' behaviors, the degree to which victims may contribute to the abuse, when and how victims are willing to challenge abuse, the effectiveness of district policies designed to stop abuse, and the exorbitant costs of abuse (e.g., costs related to investigations of complaints, teachers' time, legal fees, union representation, health insurance claims, hiring, training, and teachers' performance and productivity [Field, 1996]). In addition, much more research is needed on the impact of principal mistreatment on victimized teachers' mental and physical well-being, classroom teaching, relationships with students, involvement in school-wide improvement efforts, and student learning. Finally, research on teachers' familiarity with laws and organizational policies associated with workplace mistreatment and with ways to take individual and collective action in cases of mistreatment is warranted.

### **Conclusion**

Internationally, school leaders and teachers have expanded their responsibilities linked to school reform, including handling new power arrangements, collaborative planning, evaluation, and accountability. Plainly, the norm for schools in the US and abroad is fast becoming standards-driven, technologically-managed collaboration among educators and community members. According to Caldwell and Spinks (1992), this means that administrative and teacher leadership for schools must become *cultural* (replacing dependence with self-management and excel-

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lence driven by the values of quality, effectiveness, equity, efficiency, and empowerment), *strategic* (developing a capacity to understand emerging trends and impacts on schools), *educational* (nurturing a learning community by developing teachers', parents', and students' capacities to collaboratively accomplish tasks), and *responsive* (becoming accountable). Furthermore, Caldwell (2000) recently described new directions for public education; that is, the creation of self-managing schools, maintaining a focus on learning outcomes, and creating schools for a knowledge society, all of which have profound implications for the field.

In short, more than ever before, school reform efforts require that principals and teachers at the school level work together collaboratively to solve educational problems. Such collaboration is successful when principals build trust in their schools, because trust, in turn, serves as a foundation for open, honest, and reflective professional dialogue; problem solving; innovative initiatives; and, more directly, the development of the school as a powerful community of learners willing to take responsibility for and capable of success. All school leaders need to work toward such ends, and all educational scholars need to willingly confront the kinds of administrative mistreatment that, most assuredly, are antithetical to and undermine such efforts:

Schools run on love of the kids, the subject, the work, the hope, the possibilities, the smiles of satisfaction, the looks of appreciation, the little things that keep teachers and students and leaders going. The principal whose interactions with staff undermine this all-important source of energy by creating dissociation between teachers' self-confidence and their professional self-image is like the captain drilling a hole in her/his own ship. No matter how hard you bail, it's always sinking. Leaders who cause teachers emotional damage would be wise to reconsider the cost effectiveness, if nothing else, of disintegrating a teacher's self, a precariously balanced entity that is already overtaxed. Leaders who are sensitive to teachers' needs for congruity and emotional understanding in their professional relationships with their leaders can provide invaluable support and catalyze creativity which can benefit exponentially, the whole school community. (Beatty, 2001, p. 36)

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