

Analyzing abusive school leadership practices through the lens of social justice

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Abstract

Purpose – The present study contributes to the growing body of research on abusive supervision in school settings, particularly by principals. School leadership (principal) behavior has been a topical issue for decades in educational research. This paper attempts to add to scholarly knowledge in the area of school leadership and specifically the effect of abusive school leadership on organizational productivity and organization citizen behavior. Put succinctly, the purpose of this paper is to examine the implications of abusive school leadership on school performance and teacher behavior. Abusive leadership is attributable to behavior that is deviant, antisocial and counter-productive and that which is uncivil.

Design/methodology/approach – In examining abusive school leadership behavior and its effect on school performance and teacher behavior, this conceptual paper draws heavily from an in-depth analysis of extant scholarship and uses Rawls theory of social justice as a conceptual tool. Social justice theorists believe that social institutions are embedded with immense responsibility of dispensing justice, fairness and equity.

Findings – Building from these relevant literatures and grounding the argument from the Rawlsian perspective of social justice, it can be argued that abusive school leadership perpetuates unfair and unjust practices toward teachers, which negatively affects performance. Literature reviewed convincingly indicates that abusive tendencies are practiced in school by school leadership. Further, these abusive practices negatively impact on the following: teacher productivity, teacher turnover and, finally, staff members' well-being and health. The findings confirm that these practices perpetuate social injustice. Schools are social institutions and have to ensure that justice is served on all members of the organization, and, for this reason, Rawls (1971) argues that justice is the first virtue of social institutions.

Practical implications – The findings of this study have a number of important implications for future practice. It is critical in this study to suggest that in trying to deal with scourge, tougher measures need to be taken by various education departments to ensure that the problem is dealt with effectively. One of the interventions that is suggested is tougher policy positions on matters related to abusive leadership. In education departments that have legislation regarding consequences regarding abusive school leadership practices, tougher action should be taken against leadership which practice abuse.

Originality/value – School leadership is a highly contested research space and this conceptual paper is of great value because it adds to the already existing insights and understanding in abusive leadership in educational settings. This paper is of great significance because it focuses on the effect of abusive school leadership on teachers' behavior and school performance.

Keywords Social justice, Teachers, Abusive school leadership, School productivity

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Burke (2017) is of the view that the creation of the psychologically healthy workplaces and organizational success rests squarely on the shoulders of leadership. Leadership can break or make the organization through how it conducts itself. School leadership behavior has been a topical issue for decades in educational research and discourses, particularly its effect on organizational productivity. This study was conducted against the backdrop of international systematic studies which consistently point toward the abusive of teachers by school leadership. Confirming this assertion, Blase and Blasé (2002, 2007) contend that there is confirming empirical evidence that paint a picture of workplace abuse in countries such Sweden, Norway, Germany, Austria, Australia, and Britain and also the USA. Arguing from the basis of this finding, the researcher assumes that this could be the trend in the majority of the countries of the world.



School leadership in this paper refers specifically to the principal or the head of the school. The focus of this paper is to examine the implications of abusive school leadership on organizational productivity and organization citizen behavior. Put succinctly, the purpose of this paper is to examine the implications of abusive school leadership on school performance and teacher behavior. In examining this abusive school leadership behavior, this conceptual argument draws heavily from an in-depth analysis of relevant and extant reviewed scholarship and the theory of social justice as a conceptual tool. Social justice theorists believe that social institutions are embedded with immense responsibility of dispensing justice, fairness and equity. The discussion and the arguments are located within the theory of social justice as espoused by John Rawls (1971), who is considered the proponent of social justice.

Leadership and supervision coexist. It is thus perhaps relevant in this section to describe what abusive leadership or supervision means. To Rauniyar *et al.* (2017), abusive supervision implies subordinates' perceptions of the degree in which managers engage in the continued demonstration of unfriendly verbal and non-verbal behaviors, excluding physical contact. One of the critical responsibilities of school leadership is to act as the father figure to his or her subordinates and to ensure that an enabling environment is created where members of the organization and teachers specifically feel that they are part of the school family and are productive. School principals have the responsibility to ensure that they focus their attention on creating an enabling environments and climate that provide growth and a relaxed atmosphere that the organization that they are leading is not a threatening and dangerous place to work at (Khan *et al.*, 2017).

Methodology

This is a conceptual, qualitative and constructivist paper, and in an attempt to construct knowledge, recent and extant literature on abusive school leadership was deeply analyzed. Chandra and Shang (2017) describe constructivism as a subjective knowledge constructed from the social reality and co-constructed through human experience. John Rawls' theory of social justice was used as a theoretical framework and a theoretical lens. Abusive school leadership in this paper was explained and contextualized within the theory of social justice. The social justice theory was used to define, analyze, explain and understand the phenomenon of abusive school leadership practices and their effect on variables such as teacher productivity, teacher turnover rate, their health and health of the teacher. The study intended to respond to the following questions: how prevalent is abusive school leadership practices and which behaviors characterize abusive school leadership? Finally, how prevalent is abusive school leadership and what are the implications of such leadership practices on the teachers?

Conceptualizing the social justice theory and its relation to abusive school leadership

Education is viewed by many as a critical societal issue. García *et al.* (2016) maintain that the last decade has experienced a growing prominence of social justice as a significant theme in education. In examining abusive school leadership and its implications on teachers and the schools as organizations, this conceptual paper draws heavily from the theory of social justice as a conceptual tool. Social justice theorists, particularly John Rawls, argue that state institutions are tasked with the responsibility of perpetuating the principles of fair treatment, support and justice. Social justice education theorists see schools as sites for social amelioration in which social justice, an ideal of democracy, is practiced and cultivated (Adams *et al.*, 2007). In this paper, it can be argued that social justice and education have symbiotic relationship in that schools exists within a society and are the caricatures of the society in which they operate. It is therefore pertinent that school principals dispense

leadership practices that are characterized by the principles of fairness, justice and democracy, which are the cornerstones of justice education theorists.

This paper problematizes abusive school leadership as social injustice because of its negative effect on organization citizenship behavior and organizational productivity. It can be argued that when teachers experience abusive school leadership, this represents abuse of power and it is a constitution of social injustice and unfairness. Smith (2017) suggests that without equity, fairness and collegiality subordinates will refuse to follow and ultimately lack inspiration to serve the organization. When the principal creates an environment where all members of the staff are treated with respect, this relationship begets cooperation between school leadership and the subordinates. Abuse of power demotivates staff members and results in strained relationships and performance is affected.

Social justice promotes the right of individuals and, contextualized within a schooling environment, teachers as individuals have the right to be treated justly, fairly and respectfully by the school leadership. Drawing heavily from the Rawlsian ideas, this paper argues that the abusive behavior of school leadership deprive teachers of their full rights of justice and fairness. Rawls (1971), as a proponent of social justice, strongly argues that for individuals to enjoy equality and fairness of opportunity, first, institutions such as schools should create enabling environments where individual liberties can be easily exercised without inhibition. In this paper, it is contested that abusive school leadership contradicts the principles of social justice based on fairness and directly or indirectly perpetuates unfairness and injustice. Behaving antisocially, disrespecting and showing antisocial tendencies, such as victimizing teachers, are tantamount to social injustice. The way in which supervisors treat subordinates is very critical in organizational productivity. Burke (2017) postulates that abusive supervision is characterized by poorer subordinate job performance, aggression and other counter-productive behaviors. Victimization, disrespect, talking down subordinates, harassing, shouting and any other behavior that seeks to undermine teachers is a form of social injustice to the core.

Attributes embodying school leadership that is not abusive

School leadership has a great influence on the behavior of the teachers they supervise and generally, leadership orientation of principals appeared to have strong effects on the sociocultural contexts of schools. (Blasé, 1987). Empirical evidence found a positive relationship between great school performance and great leadership. Sebastian *et al.* (2017, p. 158) contend that “there is a growing body of evidence that school leadership has the greatest impact on teachers in the classroom and is the key factor for successful achievement of a school’s organizational goal.” Saitis and Saiti (2018) contend that the role of school leadership is critical in ensuring school effectiveness and the implementation of the programs lies squarely on the shoulders of the principals.

School principals have the responsibility to ensure that they improve excellence in their teachers and not abuse them. By improving excellence in teachers and not abusing them results in the improvement in performance and the objectives of the school will be achieved. Effective school principals demonstrate attributes that assist in the achievement of the school objectives (Fook and Sidhu, 2009). It is the responsibility of school leadership to ensure that they motivate teachers to be effective. This will help in the achievement of the objectives of the school. Abusive school leadership represents the opposite of what is expected of school leadership. Gurr (2015) identified the following attributes of successful school leadership: high expectations, pragmatic approaches, leadership distribution, invitational leadership (Fook and Sidhu, 2009), core leadership practices, heroic leadership, capacity development, trust and respect, continuous learning, personal resources, context sensitivity, sustaining success. Leadership behavior that demonstrates honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, doing the right thing, showing concern

for people, being open, visible leadership (Gumus *et al.*, 2018) is not abusive and motivates and improves performance. These leadership attributes do compliment the theory of social justice.

Abusive leadership behaviors

School leadership is a well-researched topic that often gets complicated when defined by various scholars. Abusive supervision manifests in different forms and understood differently by employees. Priesemuth and Schminke (2017) suggest that the employees' holistic perceptions of fairness in the workplace are very critical. Blasé and Blasé (2007), citing a number of scholars, use constructs such as mobbing, bullying, harassment, petty tyranny, abusive disrespect, interactional injustice, emotional abuse, mistreatment, aggression and victimization to describe the workplace mistreatment/abusive phenomenon. In addition, Blasé and Blasé (2007) add the following to their list: humiliating, intimidating, and abusive communication, committed directly or indirectly, to confuse, discredit, intimidate, and isolate an individual, to force the individual into submission or out of the workplace. Burke (2017, p. 10) is of the view that abusive school leadership is characteristic of the following behavior: "destructive, narcissistic, flawed, derailed, petty tyrants, dysfunctional, abusive, bullying, psychopathic, Machiavellian and stupid." Kelloway *et al.* (2004, p. 91) indicate that "abusive leadership behaviors can vary widely from leaders degrading their employees by yelling, ridiculing, and name-calling to terrorizing employees by withholding information or threatening employees with job loss and pay cuts."

Teachers experience victimization as a form of abuse in different forms. Victimization of staff members means that school leadership targets an individual or group of individuals and subjects them to unjust treatment. Talking down subordinates implies that such staff members are disrespected, for example, when the principal, as the leader of the school, tells the teacher that he or she is stupid or knows nothing. Harassment of the teacher implies that school leadership continuously insult or show disrespectful behavior toward his or her subordinates.

Khan *et al.* (2017, p. 165) describe the attributes of abusive leaders as follows: "public ridicule, employing the silent treatment, explosive outbursts, aggressive eye contact, breaking promises, invading privacy, lying, taking credit for subordinates' work, supervisors' violations of normative standards, and purposely withholding needed information." Supporting Khan, Quratulain and Crawshaw, Breevaart and de Vries (2017, p. 1) maintain that "abusive leadership style have a tendency to publicly ridicule, humiliate and manipulate their subordinates." Apart from public ridicule, Rauniyar *et al.* (2017) add the following behaviors of abusive leadership: criticizing publicly, making mockery, showing rudeness, breaking promises, inconsiderate actions and the silent treatments. To Hu and Liu (2017), abusive leadership behavior is characterized by authoritative tendencies with an intention to make subordinates submissive. Abusive leadership is characterized by a social dominance orientation attitude.

All these concepts negate the fundamental principles of social justice. To Martin (1999), theories of social justice propose adequate mechanisms used to regulate social arrangements in the fairest way for the benefit of all. When teachers are subjected to abuse, through the display of behavior that characterizes attributes as listed by Blasé and Blasé (2007), it constitutes human rights violation, injustice and unfairness. Burke (2017) postulates that abusive supervision is characterized by poorer subordinate job performance, aggression and other counter-productive behaviors. Blasé and Blasé (2002, p. 2) argue that "principal mistreatment of teachers is an insidious and elusive problem." "Most studies of abusive supervision operationalize the focal construct with evaluations supplied by employees who are asked to use as their referent supervisor to whom they report directly"

(Tepper *et al.*, 2017, p. 129). The attributes of abusive leaders can be displayed by either actions, words or other behavioral patterns.

Research suggests that abusive leaders display hostile behavior toward their subordinates with disturbing frequency (Lam *et al.*, 2017). Lam *et al.* (2017) further contend that when leadership lacks the capacity to effectively inhibit, override and refrain from acting upon behavioral impulses, they tend to become abusive frequently. Breevaart and de Vries (2017) argue that abusive leaders display different behavioral patterns. Hu and Liu (2017) contend that supervisors may abuse others as a tactic to convey an authoritative image and influence their subordinates. Priesemuth and Schminke (2017) are of the view that substantial research has demonstrated that abusive behavior toward subordinates does not occur in isolation. Abusive leadership enjoys doing it in public and in most cases in the presence or in front of other colleagues. In school settings, these behaviors are demonstrated before other colleagues. Priesemuth and Schminke (2017) postulate that third parties can witness abusive actions by superiors, such as ridiculing or putting employees down. Subordinates who experience such abuses respond differently. Some choose to keep quiet whereas others tend to strike back. In other instances, some brave colleagues choose to support their colleagues and take such abusers head on. Priesemuth and Schminke (2017) contend that witnesses to abuse have been shown to strike back at the transgressor, to act out in a deviant fashion or to withdraw from the situation entirely. In instances where abused colleagues receive support from the disgruntled or fed up colleagues, depending on the bravery of abusive supervisors, abusive behavior might be extended to third-party support. In such instances, this might escalate in violent conflict and there have been reports of incidents where school leadership slapped teachers because they differed with them. There are instances where violence against teachers been reported. McMahon *et al.* (2017), argue that the cause of violence directed against teachers has to be seen from multi-determined, multisource and multi-systemic perspectives. Abusive school leadership is counted as one of the attributable factors perpetuating this violence.

Coworker protective behavior includes responses such as standing up for the abused coworker, defending the victim against the supervisor or siding with the victim in abusive situations. Most research on third-party reactions to abuse has focused on retribution, driven by moral outrage and anger, as the path by which observers respond to mistreatment. Folger's deontic theory of justice explains these reactions, suggesting that all people deserve to be, and should be, treated according to moral standards of ethically appropriate behavior. Consequently, abuse witnesses are motivated to engage in behavior aimed at reducing these negative moral emotions, and many do so by seeking to harm or punish the perpetrator in some way.

Abusive supervision or abusive school leadership can be categorized as workplace bullying. Hu and Liu (2017, p. 329) contend that studies conducted on "strategic bullying suggest that people bully others to attain influence and status." Workplace bullying manifests in various forms. Tye-Williams and Krone (2017) postulate that for a long time, researchers have been focusing attention on the organizational and human costs of bullying and other forms of aggressive communication in the workplace. In spite of the efforts to address this scourge, Tye-Williams and Krone (2017, p. 218) further debate that "bullying persists as a problem in the contemporary workplace." Brendgen and Poulin (2017), define bullying as an effort that is intentionally designed to harm co-workers or subordinates by inflicting psychological or even physical injury.

Implications of abusive school leadership

Abusive leadership is not only a societal problem but also a challenge that faces organizations and schools in particular. Research on abusive supervision has gained

attention from scholars. Breevaart and de Vries (2017) confirm that abusive supervision is detrimental to both subordinates and the organizations. In the next sections, the focus will be on the implications of abusive school leadership on school productivity, teacher turnover and subordinates' well-being.

Implications on school productivity. Knies *et al.* (2017) claim that leadership is a powerful term but, often, not adequately conceptualized. The performance of a number of organizations depends on a number of factors and, in this case, the behavior of school leadership. The school as an organization has a mission to provide quality education. There is a clear cause and effect between leadership and productivity. Maxwell (2007) argues that there is a strong link between good leadership and organization outcomes. Haughton *et al.* are of the view that there is an association between great leadership and excellent organizational performance, and continue to argue that weak leadership is associated with underperformance. Khan *et al.* (2017) and Henle and Gross (2014), are of the view that abusive supervision is a costly phenomenon and it can substantially affect the organizations' productivity. Blasé and Blasé (2004, p. 251) indicate that according to the research, "abuse in the workplace is associated with a host of serious adverse effects on an individual's physical wellbeing, psychological/emotional well-being, work performance, and social relationships."

Lam *et al.* (2017) and Qu *et al.* (2017) contend that there is an adequate and substantial body of literature that illustrates negative consequences associated with abusive supervision, both for employees' psychological well-being and for their performance outcomes. Teachers play crucial roles in ensuring that educational outcomes are achieved (Mills and Ballantyne, 2016). Abusive school leadership has a constraining impact on school productivity. Hu and Liu (2017, p. 329) further reveal that "when supervisory behavior is continuously destructive, such behavior may elicit negative job attitudes among the subordinates, thereby harming the organization's capacity to function."

Abusive school leadership suppresses creativity. Despite the implications on organizational productivity, abusive school leadership affects both the team (Qu *et al.*, 2017) and the individual creativity. Breevaart and de Vries (2017) argue that employees who are led by abusive supervisors greatly suffer from these behaviors in various ways, which is in direct contrast to the theory of social justice, and a perpetuation of injustice; these behaviors range from reduced job satisfaction, lessened organizational commitment and heightened emotional exhaustion to insomnia, drinking problems and reduced family satisfaction.

Implications on teacher turnover. There is a dire supply of teachers in many countries of the world (Education For All, 2015) and abusive school leadership exacerbates the situation. In a study conducted in Mississippi, Coleman (2017), reports that the 8 percent of the public school teachers teaching during the 2012–2013 school year left the profession and were working outside of the field. Coleman (2017) further observes a trend with the quantitative analysis on his study that teachers are more inclined to remain within the profession if working in a supportive environment with adequate administrative feedback. Chen *et al.* (2017, p. 402) posit that "supportive leadership is a leadership style that is directed toward the satisfaction of subordinates' needs and preferences, such as displaying concern for subordinates' welfare and creating a friendly and psychologically supportive work environment."

Khan *et al.* (2017, p. 165) maintain that "a growing scholarly interest in abusive supervision has emerged as more research has shown that not only does it negatively affect the attitudes and behaviors of employees, but employee turnover as well." Lavoie-Tremblay *et al.* (2016) view this leadership as a form of leadership that has been shown to have detrimental effect on staff. Brendgen and Poulin (2017), argue that the victimization of colleagues by supervisors at

work have been cited as the source of work-related stress and illness and contributes toward increased employee turnover. Staff members who happen to be abused by school leadership turn to leave the system and find employment elsewhere.

A plethora of studies indicates that there is an association between teacher turnover and the level of disgruntlement (Allen *et al.*, 2018). In this paper, it can be argued that abusive school leadership is one of the many factors that contribute toward high teacher turnover. Hickson and Pugh (2007, p. 137) believe that “leaders must always adapt their behaviors to take account of the persons they lead.” Adding to the debate on the influence of the behavior of school leadership on the teachers, Eddins (2012, p. 119) concurs that “principal leadership styles which include behaviors that attribute to care, cooperation, collaboration, buy-in, vision and many other aspects that involve security and belongingness are essential for motivation and growth for teachers.” When teachers are motivated and work in an environment that provides opportunities where they feel embraced, recognized and appreciated, it is unlikely that they will leave the system soon, and Khumalo (2015) posits that school leadership that is distributive tends to inspire, motivate and make teachers committed to their work.

Jones and Watson (2017), embracing the views of Coleman (2017), argue that the administrative support teachers receive from the principal is essential and are of the view that school leadership impacts the perceptions of educators in different ways, either in positive or negative ways. To Leithwood and Sun (2012), leadership behavior in general is fundamental in the principal’s influence on staff members. Teacher turnover is either institutional or systemic. Institutionally, teachers who are negatively impacted will most likely leave the school and find employment in another school where they escapes abusive environment. In the event where the teacher continues to experience abuse, the teacher becomes frustrated and loses hope in the entire system and chooses to resign. The latter is turnover at the systems’ level.

Implications on subordinates’ well-being. Credible empirical evidence suggests that there is an association between abusive supervision and subordinates’ health problems, and, for that reason, Harms *et al.* (2017) argue that many employees rate their immediate supervisor as the worst feature of their jobs. De Vos (2013) further argue that bullying in the place of work is considered as a major psychosocial stressor in various professions and can have severe effects on the well-being of teachers. Tepper *et al.* (2017) in their investigation empirically concluded that exposure to abusive supervision has been associated with personal perceptions of psychological well-being such as depression including post-traumatic stress disorder. Harms *et al.* (2017) contend that that higher levels of abusive supervision are associated with higher levels of stress and burnout among subordinates. Not only do teachers suffer from health problems, but also from emotionally challenges, which is destructive, harmful and painful. Emotional abuse affects the performance levels of teachers and this exacerbates injustice as learners do not benefit from the schooling system. Blasé and Blasé (2006) are of the view that emotional abuse is the aggressive verbal and non-verbal behaviors with an aim of gaining compliance from the subordinates.

Conclusion

This paper problematized the effect of abusive school leadership on teacher behavior and organizational productivity. The discussions were based on critically reviewed literature. In addition, the theory of social justice from the Rawlsian perspective constituted the conceptual tool. In the chapter, the conceptualization of social justice and its relation to abusive school leadership, attributes embodying school leadership that is not abusive, theorizing abusive school leadership behavior, implications of abusive school leadership behavior on teacher behavior with specific reference on school productivity, teacher

turnover and subordinates well-being was discussed. Evidence from this study suggests that to a significant extent, school leadership demonstrate abusive leadership practices. These practices do have negative implications on the performance of the schools as organizations, and, for this reason, it can be concluded that abusive school leaders perpetuates social injustice. The findings of this study have a number of important implications for future practice. It is critical in this study to suggest that in trying to deal with scourge, tougher measures be taken by various education departments to ensure that the problem is dealt with effectively. One of the interventions that are suggested is tougher policy positions on matters related to abusive leadership. In education departments that have legislation regarding consequences regarding abusive school leadership practices, tougher action should be taken against leadership which practice abuse.

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