

Investigation of Staff Bullying in Australian Schools - Executive Summary



Dan Riley
University of New England

Deirdre J Duncan
Australian Catholic University

John Edwards
Statistical Analyst

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Author: Riley, Dan.

Title: Investigation of staff bullying in Australian schools : executive summary /
Dan Riley, Deirdre J. Duncan, John Edwards.

ISBN: 9780980637717 (pdf.)

Subjects: Bullying in schools--Australia
School violence--Australia.
Bullying in the workplace--Australia.
Violence in the workplace--Australia.
Harassment in schools--Australia.

Other Authors/Contributors:
Duncan, Deirdre J. (Deirdre Jean)
Edwards, John Sydney, 1950-

Dewey Number: 371.58

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2007 Riley, Duncan and Edwards completed the first national online survey into staff bullying in Australian schools. The population of interest was employees in Australian schools in all States and Territories, including primary and secondary schools in both the Government and non-Government sectors. Survey responses totalled over 800, of these almost 50% had executive experience and 21 years or more of teaching experience. These respondents represent a very experienced group of members of the teaching profession whose opinions warrant serious consideration. Each State and Territory was represented, with support staff, teachers, executives and principals detailing their experiences of staff bullying.

The responses were 68.5% from Government schools, 19.2% Catholic and 12.4% Independent schools. Of the respondents 71.9% were female and 27.2% were male (0.7% were not identified). The vast majority of respondents had more than 21 years of teaching experience. Two-thirds (66.8%) were classroom teachers, 9.6% were support staff while principals and executives tallied 23.7%. More than two-thirds of respondents were aged 41 years or over. Very few respondents (4.4%) were over 60 years of age. A statistically valid response rate resulted and the quantitative data were analysed using factor analysis. Almost half of the 802 respondents (44%) came from New South Wales (NSW), another 30% came from Western Australia (WA) and Queensland (QLD), with each having approximately 15% representation. NSW, WA and QLD represent about three quarters (74%) of all respondents with Australian Capital Territory (ACT), Northern Territory (NT), South Australia (SA), Tasmania (TAS) and Victoria (VIC) comprising a quarter (26%) of the sample.

If the responses from Victoria were omitted and the NSW responses reduced to 245 by random selection then a representative sample, according to the number of school employees in each State and Territory, would be achieved. However, given the exploratory nature of the research this approach was not pursued. The full data set has been used in the analysis. The research is still considered exploratory, and constructing a stratified representative sample, either by State or nationally would be the next step.

The survey instrument provided a definition of bullying as:

The term 'staff bullying' is used to differentiate between the 'playground bully' who is identified as a student and the 'staff bully' who is identified as an adult. Staff bullying relates to situations where an adult is either the perpetrator or target of bullying. Bullying has been defined as 'repeated and persistent negative acts towards one or more individual(s) which involve a persistent power imbalance and create a hostile work environment'.

This research is premised on the understanding that if a school employee perceives behaviour towards them as bullying, then that is reality for them.

The top ten items of bullying nationally out of forty-four items are experienced by between 95% to 86% of respondents. These are:

- Item 1 *Information is withheld which affects your performance (94.9%)*
- Item 9 *Questioning of your decisions, procedures and judgement (94.8%)*

- Item 2 *Tasks are set with unreasonable or impossible targets or deadlines (94.4%)*
- Item 3 *Attempts to belittle and undermine your work (92.9%)*
- Item 21 *Recognition, acknowledgement and praise are withheld (90.9%)*
- Item 18 *You are ignored or excluded (89.5%)*
- Item 42 *Your mental or physical health has been affected by the behaviour towards you (88.7%)*
- Item 38 *You are exposed to unmanageable workload (87.8%)*
- Item 25 *Frozen out/ignored/excluded from decision making (87.6%)*
- Item 6 *Undermining of your integrity (86.3%)*

However, the following six additional items are experienced by between 85% to 80% of respondents:

- Item 31 *Lack of opportunity for face-to-face discussions to take place (85.8%)*
- Item 13 *Areas of responsibility are removed or added without consultation (84.6%)*
- Item 10 *Persistent criticism of your work and effort (82.8%)*
- Item 29 *You are required to carry out tasks that clearly fall outside your job description (82.0%)*
- Item 12 *Your concerns about unfair treatment, bullying and harassment are dismissed (80.7%)*
- Item 35 *Impossible deadlines are set for you (80.6%)*

The fact that twenty-nine items out of forty-four are statistically significant when cross tabulated with Position gives a clear indication that staff bullying is very much related to a power imbalance. The research shows the power imbalance underpinning staff bullying is predominantly hierarchical.

Five items from the top ten national items of bullying are common to the four groups of States (NSW, Qld, WA and Other States). Hence half of the top ten items are common to all State groups. These are:

- Item 42 *Your mental and physical health has been affected by the behaviour towards you (50.0%)**
- Item 21 *Recognition, acknowledgement and praise are withheld (46%)*
- Item 1 *Information is withheld which affects your performance (43.6%)*
- Item 12 *Your concerns about unfair treatment, bullying and harassment are dismissed (42.6%)*
- Item 9 *Questioning of your decisions, procedures and judgement (41.8%)*

* *This represents the national figure for these items ranked by Persistent and Frequent experience.*

Item 42 is ranked first in the four groups of States - NSW, WA, QLD and the Group: ACT, NT, SA, TAS and Vic.

The results also indicate that the power imbalance is a factor in bullying as the data shows that the most persistent bullies are the school executive staff, followed by the principal.

The research findings suggest the typical profile of the school staff bully is:

- A secondary school teacher
- An executive staff member in secondary schools
- The principal in non-secondary schools

and the typical profile of the target of the school staff bully is:

- A teacher

(i) Conduct of Research

The survey instrument used in this research drew upon research by Salin (2003), Richards and Freeman (2002) and Quine (2002) plus items Duncan and Riley identified as relevant to schools. A pilot study involved three schools and approximately fifty workshop participants at an international leadership conference in Sydney in 2004. Feedback resulted in a reduction of the number of items, greater clarity, changes in presentation and editorial corrections. The survey instrument was further trialled in 2005 in a major metropolitan school system in Australia and distributed to fifty schools in both an online format and a paper-based format. This resulted in over 200 returns from teachers with the findings published by Duncan and Riley (2005). The survey instrument was further refined from fifty multiple choice items to forty-four items. On the other hand, two additional categories of bullies and targets of bullies were added to the original five categories.

The survey was conducted online at the website www.schoolbullies.org.au. The website was advertised as current research on the academic home page of one of the authors, Dr Dan Riley at the University of New England (UNE) (<http://www.une.edu.au/staff/driley2.php>) which was subsequently indexed by Google and other search engines. A link to the www.schoolbullies.org.au website was also made from the academic home page of Professor Deirdre J Duncan at Australian Catholic University (ACU National) further ensuring indexing of the website. A news item on this research was published online in a UNE staff newsletter thus ensuring further advertising and indexing of the bully survey site.

The distribution of the survey depended largely on teachers locating the website www.schoolbullies.org.au through internet searches. It took some six weeks for the site to become indexed on the major internet search engines, thus enabling teachers to locate the site by searching on the terms 'school bullies' or 'staff bullies' in Google and other search engines. The survey depended on school employees finding the site via such searches and through word of mouth of those teachers completing the survey.

The survey was available online from 22 June 2007 until 8 October 2007. Respondents were asked to provide a unique user identifier and were able to complete the survey in one or more online sessions. They were given the option to continue the survey at another time upon the completion of each section of the survey. When they logged in a second or subsequent time they were able to continue from where they left off previously. However,

they were unable to edit previously completed sections of the survey. Once all sections of the survey were completed respondents were unable to subsequently log in. Checks of submitted questionnaires were made to prevent multiple submissions of the same questionnaire.

The survey instrument contained eleven demographic questions relating to geographical location, school system type, school type, school size, employee type, school postcode (optional), gender, years teaching, years of executive experience, position, employment status and age group. Forty-four questions about bullying used a five point Likert-scale, asking respondents to rate the items as occurring either (1) Persistently, (2) Frequently, (3) Sometimes, (4) Rarely or (5) Never. Seven questions asked respondents to rate the following as bullies - Colleagues, Support Staff, Parents, Executives, Principals, Students and Others - on a five point Likert-scale as (1) Persistently, (2) Frequently, (3) Sometimes, (4) Rarely or (5) Never. Seven questions asked respondents to rate the following as the targets of bullying - Colleagues, Support Staff, Parents, Executives, Principals, Students and Others - on a five point Likert-scale as (1) Persistently, (2) Frequently, (3) Sometimes, (4) Rarely or (5) Never. The survey included three open-ended questions, one about respondents' experience of bullying, a second question asked for suggested strategies to overcome bullying in schools and a final question asked for further comment about their experiences of bullying. The open-ended data are to be reported in a subsequent report.

The following questions formed the basis of the research and the answers form a succinct summary of the findings:

Does bullying of staff occur?

- The quantitative data revealed that 99.6% (799 out of 802 respondents) experienced some form of bullying during their employment. A zero tolerance to any form of bullying is the expected norm in Australian schools.

Who are the bullies and targets?

- The data identified colleagues (85.8%) as the primary bullies when the experience of bullying (rated as Persistently, Frequently, Sometimes or Rarely experienced) is aggregated into a single category of 'Experience of Bullying', with colleagues (97.3%) as the primary targets. The first finding was unexpected given that Duncan and Riley (2005) identified parents as the primary bullies. Executives (85.4%) were then identified as bullies, followed by Parents (80.7%), Principal (78.5%) and Students (74.1%) in descending order. The primary targets are colleagues (97.3%) followed by students (92.1%) and support staff (90.7%).

Who are the persistent bullies?

- The statistical data indicated that executives were ranked first and principals were ranked second in terms of those perceived as persistent or frequent bullies. This indicated that bullying was perceived to be exercised more frequently by those in management positions. Even when colleagues were ranked first by overall experience, executives and principals were identified as second and fourth respectively.

Who are the primary targets?

- The data identified colleagues (97.3%) as the primary targets when the experience of bullying (Persistently, Frequently, Sometimes and Rarely) was aggregated into a single category. They were also the targets of bullying when the experience of bullying was aggregated into a single indicator using only the first two categories (Persistently, Frequently).

What forms of bullying of staff occur?

- Factor analysis identified four major forms of bullying, listed in order of significance these were: Personal Confrontation, Diminished Professional Standing, Workload, as well as Work Conditions and Environment as the principal forms of bullying which accounted for 63% of the variance in responses.
- *Personal Confrontation* includes: *questioning of your decisions, procedures and judgement; attempts to belittle and undermine your work; your mental and physical health have been affected by the behaviour towards you; undermining of your personal integrity; persistent criticism of your work and effort; your concerns about unfair treatment, bullying and harassment are dismissed.*
- *Diminished Professional Standing* includes: *information is withheld which affects your performance; recognition, acknowledgement and praise are withheld; you are ignored or excluded; frozen out/ignored/excluded from decision-making; lack of opportunity for face to face discussions to take place; areas of responsibility are removed or added without consultation.*
- *Workload* includes: *tasks are set with unreasonable or impossible targets or deadlines; you are exposed to unmanageable workloads; you are required to carry out tasks that clearly fall outside your job description; impossible deadlines are set for you.*
- *Work Conditions and Environment* includes: *you are physically isolated; unreasonable refusal of applications for leave, training or promotion; hints or signals from others that you should quit your job; pressured not to claim entitlements (e.g. sick leave, holidays).*

What is the effect of bullying on the individual?

A specific item (Item 42) referred to the effect of bullying on health: the statistical results showed that a disturbingly high 50% of people indicated their health was affected by persistent or frequent bullying. The primary focus of this research was the existence of staff bullying in Australian schools and not the effects upon individuals or school performance. These are areas for further investigation.

Are there gender differences in the incidence, form and effects of bullying?

There are indications of a discernible difference between the genders for six of the forty-four survey items. Five out of these six items (see below Gender Specific: Forms of Bullying) indicate a significant difference between males and females, with males indicating a higher experience of these items than females. Approximately seventy-two percent (72%) of respondents were female and 27% were male. There was no difference between genders on Item 42 referring to an effect on the health of the individual.

What strategies diminish the practice of bullying?

The results suggest that the existing legislation and statutory provisions have been effective in reducing certain behaviours that could be considered as bullying. It is proposed that to further diminish bullying there is a need to explain to employees via induction and educational programs that bullying is not acceptable behaviour.

The qualitative data should provide suggestions for effective strategies. This will be published in a following report.

(ii) Experiences of Bullying by Demographic Factors

The section below details the major survey findings when analysed by Age, School System, School Type, School Size, Gender, Teaching Experience, Executive Experience, Position, Employment Status and State and Territory.

Age Specific Forms of Bullying

Five items affect respondents in the 51 years and over category most of all. For example, *required to do work clearly below one's level of competence, job description is constantly changed without consultation, and subjected to reprisals for registering concerns or complaints*. Only the item: *work performance is deliberately sabotaged or impeded*, affected the 41-50 years category more than the other two age categories (20-40 years and over 51years). It may be that the older respondents (51 years and above) have more experience of these forms of behaviour simply due to their length of service. However what appears to be common to the five items is simply a lack of appreciation of their professional knowledge and contribution.

School System Specific Forms of Bullying

Nineteen of the survey items affect respondents in Government schools significantly more than respondents in the other systems. For example, *attempts to belittle and undermine one's work, use of discipline/competence procedures to intimidate, undermining of personal integrity, sexually harassed or subjected to unwanted sexual attention, and concerns about unfair treatment, bullying and harassment are dismissed*. This is a surprising result which needs further research because Government school employees are over-represented in these items. Only one item, *receipt of insulting emails*, affects Independent schools more than the other two systems.

School Type Specific Forms of Bullying

Six items affect respondents in secondary schools significantly more than respondents in the other category. For example, *sexually harassed or subjected to unwanted sexual attention, insulting remarks or behaviour are made about one's native language, race or ethnicity, insulting comments or behaviour are made about one's religious or political convictions, and subjected to violence to personal property*. All of these items are covered by legal statute and therefore constitute illegal behaviour which ought not to exist. Generally,

secondary school staff numbers are larger than those in Infants, Primary and Central schools and perhaps bullying behaviour is less apparent in larger groups than in smaller groups. This tendency for small pockets of illegal behaviour in secondary schools warrants investigation.

School Size Specific Forms of Bullying

None of the forty-four items demonstrated a statistically significant difference at the $P=.05$ level or lower when items were compared by school size. However, four items were found to be significantly different at the $P=0.10$ level. These included *attempts to belittle and undermine your work, insulting remarks or behaviour are made about one's native language, race or ethnicity, required to carry out tasks clearly outside one's job description* all of which have adverse effects upon one's mental or physical health.

Gender Specific Forms of Bullying

The three items which affected women more frequently than male respondents included, *sexually harassed or subjected to unwanted sexual attention; withholding of recognition, acknowledgement and praise* as well as *excessive teasing and sarcasm*. Males experienced the following three items more frequently than females, *subjected to violence to personal property; being privately reprimanded over performance and/or non-performance of responsibilities*, as well as *excessive and unreasonable supervision*. It is difficult to discern any clear pattern that affects either gender.

Teaching Experience Specific Forms of Bullying

There is a clear pattern that the more experience a teacher has, the more frequent their experience of bullying. For example, *persistent criticism of your work and effort; subjected to verbal and/or non-verbal threats; job description constantly changed without consultation; key responsibilities removed or replaced with trivial or meaningless tasks; rumours and gossip are spread about individuals; and one is ignored or excluded*. Conversely, teachers with less than five years experience have less experience of these types of bullying behaviour than their colleagues. This suggests that the more experienced teachers are more aware of bullying behaviour in schools and more prepared to identify it as bullying.

Executive Experience Specific Forms of Bullying

Executives are grouped into the three categories of five years or less, six to ten years, or eleven years or more. Four items affect executives with five years or less experience more than the other two groups, these are, *insulting remarks or behaviour about one's native language, race or ethnicity; frozen out, ignored, excluded from decision-making; pressured not to claim entitlements; subjected to excessive teasing and sarcasm*. Only one item affects executives with eleven or more years experience more frequently and it was *receipt of insulting written message or telephone calls*. Three items seem to predominantly affect executives with six to ten years experience. For example, *frozen out, ignored, excluded from decision-making; receipt of insulting written message or telephone calls; and pressured not to claim entitlements*. Two items seem to be a common experience for the two groups of executives with less than ten years experience. These were *exclusion from decision-making* and *pressured not to claim entitlements*. While there was only one

common item for those with more than six years executive experience and it related to *receipt of insulting written messages or telephone calls*.

Position Specific Forms of Bullying

Twenty-nine items out of forty-four are statistically significant ($P < 0.05$) when analysed by position. This gives a clear indication that bullying is very much related to a power imbalance. Twenty-five items affect teachers more than support staff and principals and executives. For example, *imposition of unreasonable or impossible targets or deadlines; concerns about unfair treatment, bullying and harassment are dismissed; lack of opportunity for face-to-face discussions to take place; threats to make one's life difficult, subjected to reprisals for registering concerns or complaints*. Five items affect support staff including *being ignored or excluded; subjected to intimidating behaviour; changes to workplace facilities without warning or explanation; and excessive and unreasonable supervision*. However, four items affect principals, for example, *subjected to verbal and/or non-verbal threats; spreading of rumours and gossip; receipt of insulting emails; and receipt of insulting written messages or telephone calls*. The fact that principals and executives are also affected by bullying behaviour suggests that the power imbalance underpinning bullying may not be strictly hierarchical.

Employment Status Specific Forms of Bullying

Three items affect full-time employees more than part-time employees, while one item affects part-time employees more than full-time employees. The three items affecting full-time employees included *being shouted at or the target of rage or anger; being subjected to verbal and non/or non-verbal threats; and the spread of rumours and gossip about individuals*. The one item affecting part-time employees was the *constant change of one's job description without consultation*.

State and Territory Specific Forms of Bullying

There appear to be considerable differences between the States in their responses to the bullying items. NSW and WA are the two States with the highest number of items whose means are significantly different from the other States, which is a group representing ACT, NT, SA, Tas and Vic. These States were combined into a single group because of their smaller representation within the sample.

NSW is significantly different from the seven other Australian States and Territories in thirty-eight out of forty-four items. The item means for these thirty-eight items are higher for NSW than for the other States or group of States and the difference in means is statistically significant. The same pattern is evident when NSW is compared with all other States when grouped together.

When NSW is compared with QLD there are forty items of significant difference where NSW item means are higher than for QLD. When NSW is compared with WA there are fourteen items of significant difference.

When WA is compared with other Australian States it is found to have significantly higher item means than only two other States or group of States, i.e. QLD and Other States (grouped as ACT, NT, SA, TAS and VIC). WA has significantly higher means than QLD

in twenty-four of the forty-four items. Similarly, WA has significantly higher means than the Other States in ten of the forty-four items.

Common Items within all States and Territories

Five items from the top ten national items of bullying are common to the four groups of States (NSW, Qld, WA and Other States). Hence half of the top ten items are common to all State groups. These are:

- Item 1 *Information is withheld which affects your performance*
- Item 9 *Questioning of your decisions, procedures and judgement*
- Item 12 *Your concerns about unfair treatment, bullying and harassment are dismissed*
- Item 21 *Recognition, acknowledgement and praise are withheld*
- Item 42 *Your mental and physical health has been affected by the behaviour towards you*

Item 42 is ranked first in all States and Territories.

(iii) Who are the Bullies and Who are the Targets?

In response to the request to rank perceptions of who were the bullies and who were the targets, it was found that colleagues, executives, parents, principals and students were experienced most frequently as bullies, whereas support staff were identified as less likely to be bullies. However, when the categories 'Persistently' and 'Frequently' were aggregated, Executives and Principals were perceived as bullies by nearly four out of ten participants. Perhaps the surprising finding in this area was the perception that three out of ten participants persistently and frequently identified one's colleagues as bullies. Equally informative was the experience of students and parents as persistent and frequent bullies by almost one out of five participants.

As might be expected, the corollary of this was found to be true, that colleagues, students and support staff were perceived as targets by 97.3%, 92.1% and 90.7% of respondents respectively. Compounding these findings was that one out of two respondents identified colleagues as persistent and frequent targets. This indicates a need for these three groups to be provided with appropriate strategies for eliminating bullying.

(iv) Bullies and Targets of Bullying by Demographic Factors

The section below details the major survey findings of bullies and the targets of bullying when analysed by Age, School System, School Type, School Size, Gender, Teaching Experience, Executive Experience, Position, Employment Status and State/Territory.

Targets and Bullies by Age

When school staff bullies are analysed by Age, only one significant difference is found between the three age groups 20-40 years, 41-50 years and over 50 years. Employees over

forty years of age experience the principal as frequently or persistently the bully to a higher degree than those forty years or younger. That is to say, older school staff seems to experience and perceive the principal as frequently or persistently a bully.

When the targets of school staff bullying are analysed by Age, only one significant difference is found between the three age groups 20-40 years, 41-50 years and over 50 years. Employees over forty years of age have a higher experience of executives as sometimes or frequently the targets of school staff bullying than those under forty years of age. Thus older employees have more experience of executives as the target of bullying.

Targets and Bullies by School System

When school staff bullies are analysed by School System, only one significant difference is found between the States and Territories. In Government schools the principal receives a significantly higher nomination as frequently or persistently the bully than is found in Independent schools. No significant difference is found between Government and Catholic schools.

However, when targets of school staff bullying are analysed by School System, no significant differences are found between Government, Independent or Catholic Independent and Catholic Systemic school systems.

Targets and Bullies by School Type

When school staff bullies are analysed by School Type, three significant differences are found between Infants, Primary and Central schools and Secondary schools. In Secondary schools, executives receive more nomination as frequently or persistently the bully than is found in Infants, Primary and Central schools. In comparison, in Infants, Primary and Central schools, the principal is cited more frequently as the bully in comparison with principals in Secondary schools. A third of Infants, Primary and Central school respondents have never experienced student bullies compared with only one in five respondents in Secondary schools.

When the targets of school staff bullying are analysed by School Types, two significant differences are found between Infants, Primary and Central schools and Secondary schools. In Infants, Primary and Central schools, parents receive a significantly higher nomination as frequently or persistently the target than is found in Secondary schools. While in Secondary schools, students receive a significantly higher nomination as frequently or persistently the target than is found in Infants, Primary and Central schools.

Targets and Bullies by School Size

When school staff bullies are analysed by School Size, significant differences are found between schools with less than 200 students, schools with 201-500 students and schools with over 500 students. In large schools (>500 students), executives receive a significantly higher nomination as frequently or persistently the bully than is found in small (<200 students) or medium sized schools (between 201 to 500 students). In small schools (<200 students) however, the principal receives a significantly higher nomination as frequently or persistently the bully than is found in larger schools.

When the targets of school staff bullying are analysed by School Size, only one significant difference is found between different sized schools. In small schools (<200 students) and medium-sized schools (201-500 students), parents receive a significantly higher nomination as frequently or persistently the target than is found in large schools (>500 students).

Targets and Bullies by Gender of Respondents

When school staff bullies are analysed by Gender, two significant differences are found between male and female respondents. Colleagues and support staff both receive a significantly higher nomination from females as frequently or persistently the bully than is found with male respondents.

When the targets of school staff bullying are analysed by Gender, no significant differences are found between male and female respondents.

Targets and Bullies by Teaching Experience

When school staff bullies are analysed by Teaching Experience, five significant differences are found between the three groups. Teachers with ten or less years teaching experience cite colleagues as frequently or persistently the bully, while those with ten or more years teaching experience cite executives, the principal, students and support staff as frequently or persistently the bully.

When the targets of school staff bullying are analysed by Teaching Experience, three significant differences are found between the three teaching experience groups. Teachers with ten or less years teaching experience cite colleagues as frequently or persistently the target of school staff bullying, while teachers with ten or more years teaching experience increasingly cite executives and the principal as sometimes the target of school staff bullying.

Targets and Bullies by Executive Experience

When school staff bullies are analysed by Executive Experience, only one significant difference is found between the three groups, executives with less than five years experience, executives with six to ten years experience, and executives with eleven or more years experience. Executives with six or more years executive experience cite parents as more frequently or persistently the bully than those with five years or less or no executive experience. This may reflect the greater exposure that longer serving executives have in dealings with parents.

When the targets of school staff bullying are analysed by Executive Experience, three significant differences are found between the three executive experience groups. Firstly, with increasing executive experience, executives show a decreasing awareness of colleagues as the targets of bullying; secondly, and in contrast, with increasing executive experience, executives become more aware of themselves as the frequent or persistent targets of bullying; and finally, with increasing executive experience executives become more aware of the principal as the frequent or persistent target of bullying. These contrasting levels of awareness as to who are the targets of bullying suggest the need for greater education at a school level about school staff bullying.

Targets and Bullies by Position

When school staff bullies are analysed by Position, three significant differences are found between the support staff, teachers, executives and principals. Firstly, there is an increasing experience of parents as frequently or persistently the bully as one moves from the role of support staff, teacher, executive and principal. Secondly, principals are less likely to experience executives as the bully than are teachers, other executives or support staff. Thirdly, support staff, executives and teachers in increasing order are most likely to experience the principal as a frequent or persistent bully.

When the targets of school staff bullying are analysed by Position, no significant differences are found between the experiences of support staff, teachers, executives and principals.

Targets and Bullies by Employment Status

When school staff bullies are analysed by Employment Status, only one significant difference is found between fulltime and part-time employees. Fulltime employees are more likely to perceive parents as the bully than part-time employees. Five in eight fulltime staff (62.3%) sometimes experience parents as bullies, while a further one in five fulltime staff (19.7%) frequently or persistently experience parents as bullies.

When the targets of school staff bullying are analysed by Employment Status no significant differences are found between fulltime and part-time employees.

Bullies and Targets by States and Territories

When school staff bullies are analysed by State, two significant differences are found between the States and Territories. In NSW and WA, executives and the principal receive a significantly higher nomination as frequently or persistently the bully than is found in other Australian States and Territories.

When targets of school staff bullying are analysed by State, only one significant difference is found between States and Territories. In NSW and WA, colleagues receive a significantly higher nomination as frequently or persistently the target than is found in other Australian States and Territories.

(v) Bullies and Targets of Bullying by Factors Analysis Bullying Constructs

The section below details the major survey findings when the bullies and the targets of bullying are analysed by the four forms of bullying identified by factor analysis. These are Personal Confrontation Bullying, Diminished Professional Standing Bullying, Workload Bullying and Work Conditions and Environment Bullying.

Bullies and Targets of Personal Confrontation Bullying

Principals and executives are perceived as the main bullies, with colleagues some small margin below. Clearly colleagues are identified as the main targets of Personal Confrontation Bullying.

Bullies and Targets of Diminished Professional Standing Bullying

The top three bullies here – executives, principals and colleagues – are the same as for Personal Confrontation Bullying except that the position of executives and principals is reversed. Also, these are the only three groups of bullies common to Personal Confrontation Bullying and Diminished Professional Standing Bullying. Personal Confrontation Bullying identifies parents and students as bullies but support staff in Diminished Professional Standing Bullying replaces these.

The top two targets of this form of bullying are colleagues and support staff. Colleagues are identified by two in every three (65.5%) of those frequently or more often the targets of bullying. Support staff are identified by three in eight (37.9%) of those most bullied as frequently or persistently the target.

Bullies and Targets of Workload Bullying

There is almost equal agreement that the principal and executives are most frequently the bullies when ranked by those with the greatest exposure to Workload Bullying. Colleagues and parents are listed third and fourth respectively, with students experienced by one in five of the high exposure group. The high exposure group represents those most exposed to Workload Bullying when respondents are grouped into three groups ordered by experience of this form of bullying.

The high exposure group identified colleagues as the primary targets with support staff and students as secondary targets. Only one in five identified executives as tertiary targets of bullying.

Bullies and Targets of Work Conditions and Environment Bullying

The primary bullies are executives, principals and colleagues; secondary bullies are students and tertiary bullies are support staff.

The targets of Work Conditions and Environment Bullying are students, executives and the principal. It is clear that colleagues are the primary targets of Work Conditions and Environment Bullying. Three in every five of those with high exposure to Work Conditions and Environment Bullying nominate colleagues as frequently or persistently the targets of this form of bullying. On the other hand, support staff are nominated by two in five of those in the high exposure group. Parents receive weaker support in the frequently or persistently target category but are cited by two in three as sometimes the targets.

(vi) Major Findings

Extent of bullying

Probably one of the most worrying findings of this research was the extent of the bullying that apparently is experienced by employees in Australian schools. One out of every two respondents had experienced nearly three-quarters of the situations listed and, in this regard, it is interesting to consider the suggestion by Richards and Freeman (2002) that the numerous contemporary pressures inherent in teaching may contribute to bullying between staff members. The finding concerning unreasonable targets/deadlines [Item 2], which was experienced by 94.4% of respondents, tends to support this suggestion which is compounded when 41.1% of respondents experience it persistently and frequently. A pertinent question here is: *Does this experience stem from a culture of high work ethic and/or escalation of work expectations in Australian schools?*

The corollary of this is that only 0.03% of employees had never experienced any form of bullying compared with those who had experienced all five suggested forms of bullying identified by Zapf et al. (1996). Examples of Zapf's kinds of bullying behaviour include *staff being required to carry out tasks that were obviously outside their job description* (Item 29-78.1%); *having a lack of opportunity for face-to-face discussions* (Item 31-85.8%); *insulting remarks being made about a person's native language, race or ethnicity* (Item 19-19.3%); *being shouted at or being target of rage or anger* (Item 11-76.7%) and *having rumours and gossip spread about them* (Item 17-77.6%) – all bullying behaviour presents to a greater or lesser extent.

It could be argued that some of the bullying behaviour described in items in the survey was merely normal behaviour, rather than bullying, or it represented the exigencies of life in a busy, bustling or creative school. However, all items included in the survey were supported by both the pilot survey and the literature (e.g. Duncan and Riley, 2005; Salin, 2003) as describing bullying behaviour, so were not omitted. It is also true that if a staff member perceives behaviour they experience as bullying, then that is reality for them!

Another worrying finding is the negative effect that bullying was having on the target's physical and mental health (Item 42), where this was affecting one in four respondents. This was closely followed by behaviour that involved attempts to belittle and undermine the staff member's work and recognition, acknowledgement and praise being withheld. One in five respondents experienced both of these types of bullying behaviour. This would seem to have a negative impact on the performance of the teacher and, therefore, on student learning outcomes, although these are areas for future research. In fact, the persistent adverse effect of bullying upon the well being of staff may be evident in claims for stress leave and premature retirement.

Other findings worthy of special comment include those relating to the power imbalance, school size, school type and teaching experience. Firstly, the presence of a power imbalance was found in many instances of bullying behaviour. The fact that twenty-nine of the forty-four bullying items are related to hierarchical position within the school indicates that bullying is connected to a power imbalance and as many as twenty-five items affected teachers more than principals, executives and support staff. However it was apparent that

support staff did suffer from a power imbalance in relation to bullying as the findings indicated that almost two out of three of them were subjected to verbal and non-verbal threats and three times the number of support staff experienced intimidating behaviour such as invasion of personal space, shoving and blocking the way.

An interesting finding in relation to power was related to years of experience as an executive member. Respondents with six or more years executive experience cite parents as more frequently or persistently the bully than those with five years or less or no executive experience. This may reflect the greater exposure that longer serving executives have in dealings with parents. However, in relation to identification of the targets of bullying, it was found that those with increasing executive experience show a decreasing awareness of colleagues as the targets of bullying, which might help explain the finding that claims of bullying were dismissed.

The analysis becomes interesting when position varies across the school hierarchy or roles. Firstly, there is an increasing experience of parents as frequently or persistently the bully as one moves from the role of support staff, teacher, and executive to principal. Secondly, principals are less likely to experience executives as the bully than are teachers, other executives or support staff. Thirdly, support staff, executives and teachers in increasing order are most likely to experience the principal as a frequent or persistent bully.

Teaching experience was also found to be interesting in that almost half of respondents with less than five years experience had never been privately reprimanded over their performance. This suggests that less experienced teachers are accepting of such behaviour in their 'junior' position or that they have not yet grown aware of a culture of bullying.

An interesting difference emerged in the findings in relation to school type. Respondents from government schools figured more highly in responses relating to behaviour more aligned with more bureaucratically characterised organisations. Such behaviour included the *use of discipline procedures to intimidate; questioning of decisions, procedures and judgment; concerns about unfair treatment, bullying and harassment being dismissed; areas of responsibility removed or added without consultation and threats of making life difficult.*

Finally, it is interesting to note that bullying behaviour such as *sexual harassment; violence to personal property; insulting comments about religious convictions and physical abuse and threats*, in other words behaviour covered by legislation and staff education, was experienced by less than 4% of respondents. This seems to indicate the value of education and legislation in reducing undesirable behaviour.

(vii) Leadership Action

An examination of the common top five quantitative results across all States and Territories, prior to any factor analysis, indicates a need for leadership action to reduce or eliminate bullying of staff in schools. The most frequent and persistent impact of bullying on staff is the negative effect it has on the targets' *physical and mental health* (Item 42). The other items in the top five were *information is withheld which affects performance* (Item 1), *questioning of decisions, procedures and judgement* (Item 9), *concerns about unfair treatment, bullying and harassment are dismissed* (Item 12) and *recognition, acknowledgement and praise are withheld* (Item 21).

The study of who are the bullies and who are the targets indicates the need for principals to focus more on the elimination of bullying since colleagues are identified, not only as frequently the bullies, but also most frequently the targets. The high ranking of parents as bullies also is worthy of the principal's attention in terms of protection of staff and also in terms of parent education about expectations held for them in dealing with school related matters.

The results of the study are of concern in relation to the extent of the bullying experienced by employees in Australian schools. Of the 802 respondents, 799 had experienced some form of bullying during their period of employment with at least 50% or more of respondents indicating experience with almost three-quarters of the survey items (thirty-two out of forty-four or 72.7%). That is to say, one out of every two respondents had experienced nearly three-quarters of the situations listed.

In this regard it is interesting to consider the suggestion by Richards and Freeman (2002) that the numerous contemporary pressures inherent in teaching may contribute to bullying between staff members. The finding concerning *unreasonable or impossible targets/deadlines* (Item 2), which was experienced by 94.4% of respondents, tends to support this suggestion which is compounded when 41.1% of respondents experience it persistently and frequently. A pertinent question here is: *Does this experience stem from a culture of high work ethic and/or escalation of work expectations in Australian schools?*

(vii) Recommendations

The following recommendations are directed towards three audiences: systems, schools and individuals:

Recommendation 1

- 1.1 Educational leaders to recognize the existence of staff bullying in its multiple forms (Personal Confrontation, Diminished Professional Standing, Workload and Work Conditions and Environment) and address the issue at system and school levels. Awareness raising at the system and school level with all staff should be adopted.
- 1.2 School leaders to raise awareness of the policies, guidelines and existing resources such as exist within school systems and individual schools.
- 1.3 Priority for participation in such awareness raising in-services should be provided to the most likely perceived bullies [executive staff] and the most likely perceived targets [experienced teachers].

Recommendation 2

All school staff to be invited to discuss any experience(s) of staff bullying with a school or system designated representative/ombudsman.

Recommendation 3

Those in leadership positions to reflect on their leadership behaviour in regard to their relationship with all school staff and parents. In addition there should be awareness raising about the phenomenon of bullying of staff and how it should be handled in the induction of staff into any formal leadership position.

Recommendation 4

Given the high percentage of staff who have experienced bullying, this research should be replicated in a stratified random sample across the nation using a refined instrument and with the inclusion of more qualitative methods involving interviews.

Recommendation 5

Further research focus upon the effects of bullying at the personal, school and system levels.

Recommendation 6

The school executive staff and system leaders to work with parents on appropriate procedures to foster good parent/school relationships.

Recommendation 7

Schools to establish a bullying register which is kept by the principal and is open for inspection.

(ix) Conclusion

A number of the findings of this research are causes for concern. Probably the most significant of these is the high percentage of staff in Australian schools who obviously suffer bullying. It could be argued that those who have been bullied might constitute the majority of the respondents and so, a high percentage is to be expected. Even if this is true, there is the fact that, for these people, they perceive they are being bullied and, for them, that is

reality. The research findings also highlight the indisputable fact that bullying of staff does occur in Australian schools and when it affects the mental and physical health of those being bullied, as our results show, then it is time for some action to be taken to eliminate staff bullying. Importantly, the results of the research identify the forms that bullying behaviour can take. This should help make it easier to take steps to reduce or eliminate it. The results also indicate that the power imbalance is a factor in bullying as the data show that the most persistent bullies are the school executive staff, followed by the principal. A major implication of the results is the role that leadership should be taking in eliminating the phenomenon of staff bullying. This is apparent from the result just referred to (executive and principal are 'persistently and frequently', the bullies) and also when the most significant factors in bullying are taken into account. School leadership could take positive steps to eliminate 'diminished professional standing' of staff, adjust workloads appropriately and improve work conditions and environment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researchers, Dr Dan Riley, University of New England, Professor Deirdre J Duncan, Australian Catholic University and John Edwards thank the University of New England and the Australian Catholic University for their support. Without the financial assistance and provision of technical expertise it would not have been possible to undertake this research. It is also important to acknowledge the trust of respondents in Australian schools who completed the survey and have waited for the release of this report. Without their participation there would be no report. It is unfortunate that within one of the richest countries of the Western World, nearly all participants had experienced bullying during their employment.

About the authors:



Dr Dan Riley is a senior lecturer at the University of New England with extensive experience with Government, Catholic and Independent schools. Dan is a strong advocate for the identification and prevention of the phenomenon of adult bullying in the workplace.



Dr Deirdre Duncan is an Adjunct Professor of ACU National. She has extensive experience in senior leadership positions in education and has published widely in the areas of leadership, school law, organisational change and school culture. Her most recent research has been on staff bullying in schools.



John Edwards is a statistical analyst with over twenty years experience teaching in secondary schools and has lectured in research methodology at university. In 2005 and 2007 he was part of a research team with Duncan and Riley investigating adult bullying in Australian schools.

ABOUT THE BOOK

This book is about research conducted on staff bullying in Australian schools. While there is considerable research about student bullying in schools there is very little research on staff bullying. The term 'staff bullying' is used to differentiate between the 'playground bully' who is identified as a student and the 'staff bully' who is identified as an adult. Staff bullying relates to situations where an adult is either the perpetrator or target of bullying and has been defined as 'repeated and persistent negative acts towards one or more individual(s) which involve a persistent power imbalance and create a hostile work environment'.

In 2007 Riley, Duncan and Edwards completed the first national online survey into staff bullying in Australian schools. The population of interest was employees in Australian schools in all States and Territories, including primary and secondary schools in both the Government and non-Government sectors. The survey found that 99.6% of respondents had experienced one or more of the forty-four instances of bullying listed in the survey - a highly disturbing finding in an area where zero tolerance to any form of bullying is the expected norm in Australian schools.

The research is focused on answering the following questions: Does bullying of staff occur? Who are the bullies and who are the targets? Who are the persistent bullies? Who are the primary targets? What forms of bullying of staff occur? What is the effect of bullying on the individual? Are there gender differences in the incidence, form and effects of bullying? What strategies diminish the practice of bullying?

Riley, Duncan and Edwards draw the following conclusion,

"The research findings highlight the indisputable fact that bullying of staff does occur in Australian schools and when it affects the mental and physical health of those being bullied, as our results show, then it is time for some action to be taken to eliminate staff bullying. A major implication of the results is the role that leadership should be taking in eliminating the phenomenon of staff bullying."

