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## **Abusive School Leadership Practices and Teacher Dissenting Voices: Analysis through Nancy Fraser and Miranda Fricker**

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### **Abstract**

Research notes a significant rise in varied practices of abusive supervision within the schooling context. Abusive leadership is a social justice dilemma which needs sustained confrontation. This qualitative conceptual study provides a philosophical exploration of the practices of abusive school leadership towards teachers with dissenting voices. This paper takes a conceptual methodological approach and deploys dominant social justice theories espoused by Miranda Fricker and Nancy Fraser as underpinning lenses. Extant and established scholarly literature on abusive supervision was identified and critically analysed. In its examination, the guiding research question was: what are the attributes of abusive school leadership and how do such leadership react to voices that are dissenting? This study is significant because there seem to be inadequate scholarly and empirical contributions on abusive school leadership practices towards teacher dissenting voices.

**Keywords:** *Leadership practices, school, teacher dissenting voices, abusive supervision, social justice.*

### **1. Introduction**

This paper provides an analysis of abusive school leadership on the suppression of teacher dissenting voices. In this study, dissenting voices refer to teachers who have the guts to express themselves and holding different opinions to that of school leaders

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particularly in schooling environment characterized by abusive leadership practices. Bashshur and Oc (2015, 1531) define “voice as the discretionary or formal expression of ideas, opinions, suggestions, or alternative approaches directed to a specific target inside or outside of the organization with the intent to change an objectionable state of affairs and to improve the current functioning of the organization, group, or individual”. Social power in social systems can be abused and abusers deliberately dispense toxic power under the pretext that they are legally authorized to demand compliance without questioning by subordinates with dissenting voices. Consequently, subordinates who confront such leaders are perceived as disrespecting, dissenting and bad influence in the organization. Abusive school leadership tends to disregard laws and legislation governing their office and in this case that of the principal. In this study, school leadership refers to school principals or school managers. The characterization of this abusive behaviour manifests in different shapes and forms. Abusive leadership practice is intentional and is not unleashed unwittingly and it is intended for identified targets (dissenting voices). This form of this disruptive, toxic, hubristic, narcissistic and uncivil behaviour can have far-reaching ramifications on the lives of the subordinates. This leadership manifest in the following examples of behaviours: shouting, talking down on subordinate, sexual harassment (Tepper, 2007), angry outbursts, public ridiculing (Keashly, Trott & MacLean, 1994), gossiping colleagues with subordinates, inconsistent treatment of colleagues and factional behaviour (for an example recommending leave without pay to teachers perceived badly and protecting those close to the leader).

These examples of abusive school leadership practices are manifestation of deep-rooted social injustice. Social justice leaders’ express confidence in followers and maintain hope, promotes self-concept and heightened self-esteem, social identification, self-expression. Theohari (2007) associates this brand of leadership approach with positive effects on followers’ commitment, self-sacrifice, and organizational citizenship. School leadership that reflects just practices are considerate, hospitable, collegial, emphatic, sympathetic and create conducive culture and climate. The common

denominator in social justice theories is fairness and justice. Folger and Cropanzano (2001) and Rawls (1971) are of the view that organizational justice is rooted in fairness theory. Anything opposite to this brand of leadership practices perpetuates unjust and unfair leadership posture and I argue that this can be characterized as dysfunctional leadership approach. Literature analysis I conducted indicates lack of relevant scholarly attention to the behaviour of school leadership towards teacher dissenting voices and the primary rationale for this examination is to provide insights into this leadership. This study examines the role that abusive principals play in perpetuating social injustice by deliberately silencing teachers who embrace different viewpoints. These teachers are referred as the social justice revolutionists who despite the ruthlessness and vitriolic attacks by abusive school leaders, continue to make their voices heard.

## **Revision of specialty literature**

### **2.1. Conceptualizing, characterizing and identifying abusive school leadership.**

Leadership is highly critical in any organization and the success of that organization rests mainly and squarely on the shoulders of its leadership. Leadership is not only what leaders do but also what leaders bring in their leadership, which is personality. Abuse is not something that one learns from books but can be learned through modelling an abusive leader. Abusive leadership or supervision as some scholars argue manifest in many forms and shapes in organizations and in this case in schools (Fischer, Tian, Lee & Hughes, 2021). Research in this area is receiving attention due to public interest and its incremental nature (Khattak & Rizvi, 2021). A plethora of studies attest to the fact that this destructive and dehumanising leadership is on the increase in organizations (Yao & Xia, 2014; Xu, E, Huang, Lam, & Miao, 2012). Several scholars describe abusive supervision differently. Tepper, Simon and Park (2017) define abusive supervision as “subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained

display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact. Tepper et al. (2017) further argue that abusive supervision is characterized by sustained forms of verbal or non-verbal hostility toward subordinates performed by supervisors, except for physical contact. In addition, the authors identify examples of abusive practices which are blatantly dehumanizing such as: *“I am told my thoughts are stupid, He puts me down in front of colleagues and he blames me for not saving himself or herself embarrassment”*.

Abusive supervision may comprise mocking, negative statements, and humiliating one's value in front of other employees or his subordinates due to which employees are mostly involved in counterproductive work behaviors (Khattak & Rizvi, 2021). Abusive leadership is manipulative of its victims (Jua, Huangb, Liu, Qin, Hu, Chen, 2019). Some of these principals are so powerful that they have established corrupt networks with education district officials and members of the school governing bodies or school committees. These relationships are of corrupt nature. There has been reported cases of murder of some of the staff members who raise fundamental matters against such abusers. Some of these subordinates have been subjected to victimization through unfair and concocted disciplinary hearings where victims are end up being unfairly dismissed. All these practices are contrary to social justice leadership which promotes fairness.

It can be further argued that this form of leadership is not performed overtly and at times very difficult to observe. Sometimes it manifests as misunderstandings where in real its abusive and perpetrators find themselves in perpetual circle and even when they are made aware, they show remorse for a while and then go back to the same behaviour. This behaviour becomes part of the abuser and enjoys such. Abusive practices do not manifest as isolated in the schools, but as an extension of behaviour emanating from communities or home environment. You would find that these leaders who practice it either do the same to their siblings, children or partners (Huh & Lee, 2021). Mackey, Frieder, Brees and Martinko (2017) identify two distinguishable subjective perceptions, one of which speaks to what supervisory leaders do (e.g., derogatory comments,

uncontrolled outbursts, strategic undermining behaviour) and one of which addresses employees' attitudes toward their supervisors.

Experienced abusers learn the tactic of applying it to hide from the law enforcers or authorities. In such cases it is very difficult to prove and that is why perpetrators' operation is subtle. It must be stated that claims by subordinates must be approached with caution by authorities. The subjective and objective part of reporting is very critical and education authorities should have effective systems and protocols in place to verify the veracity of the claim. Tepper (2000) acknowledges that there is likely to be subjectivity associated with perceptions of supervisory abusiveness. The same individual could view a supervisor's behaviour as abusive in one context and as non-abusive in another context, and two subordinates could differ in their evaluations of the same supervisor's behaviour (Tepper, 2000). For an example, sometimes school leadership might require accountability from lazy teachers, and this might be construed as abuse. There are instances where a leader might be set up by subordinates to bring him/her down particularly when a culture of laziness or unaccountability has been established. This happens when new leadership takes over schools that have been dysfunctional over a long period of time.

## **2.2 Harmful consequences of abusive school leadership**

Recently, scholars have developed interest on the consequences of abusive supervision (Zhang & Liao, 2015). Leadership as a function and as personality can make or break the morale of subordinates and the organization (Khumalo, 2019). The organization cannot be an organization without people who are subordinates. Abusive supervision does have ramifications on the individual, school as an organization, the family of the abused individual, the health of the abused and the education system. (Khumalo, 2019). The effect on the victim is that not only his/her health is affected but also suffers emotionally and their well-being is greatly affected (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002; Hobbler & Brass, 2006). Tepper (2002) asserts that abusive leaders also negatively affect subordinate's innovativeness and staff turnover.

Schat, Frone and Kelloway, (2006) are of the view that abusive supervision affects a huge chunk of the American employees (about 13.6%) and this translates into substantial financial costs. The authors further posit that the victims of non-physical managerial hostility report diminished well-being and quality of work life that can spill over to their lives away from work. These costs are estimated to run into billions of US dollars (to be exact \$23.4 billion annually) and can be categorised in terms of absenteeism, health care costs, loss of productivity (Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lambert, 2006). Employees with legal advantage who have been victims of abusive leadership end up suing the education authorities' substantial amounts of capital. On another note, Zhang and Liao (2015, 962) in supporting Tepper (2000) argue that "abusive supervision negatively influences subordinate work-related attitudes, including job satisfaction, organizational commitments, organizational identification and turnover intentions".

### **2.3. Social justice school leadership: Its conception and expectations**

Zhang, Goddard and Jakubiec (2018) are of the view that social justice leadership is a complex and multi-dimensional concept. Ideally, school leaders should strive for justice principles such as inclusivity, equity, fairness, and further ensure that just opportunities are created to all role players, both learners and teachers (Mavrogordato & White, 2020). Similarly, Shoho, Merchant and Lugg, (2005); Tribe and Bell (2018) and Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano (2019) maintain that as much as this brand of leadership is based on social justice principles, there remain varied interpretations of what social justice leadership is by scholars. Hereunder follows the sampled scholarly definitions of social justice school leadership. Arar (2020) argues that "social justice reflects the mindset that inequities are not natural or acceptable, as such injustices stemming from implicit bias are inherently rejected from being the norm by social justice leaders. Theohari's (2007) submits that "social justice is a sub-group of leaders for social justice intended to guide their schools to transform the culture, pedagogical practice, atmosphere, and

schoolwide priorities to benefit the marginalized. According to Gewirtz (1998), social justice is based on the philosophy that intends on disrupting and subverting arrangements that promote marginalization and exclusionary practices. Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002) define social justice “as the exercise of altering these institutional and organizational arrangements by actively engaging in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions.

I hold the view that despite different interpretations of this construct scholarly, the distinction is marginal and there appears to be a common denominator from varied scholars. This leadership is grounded on the common believe that it is characterized in the main by an overarching principle of justice espoused by Rawls who is considered the advocate of social justice, namely justice as fairness (Rawls, 1971). School principals should in dispensing their leadership practices inculcate social justice principles. This can be done by creating opportunities for teachers to flourish, grow and excel. The schooling context must provide platforms where all role players including teachers are shareholders in the organization and feel valued despite their views. These will always boost their morale and self-esteem. Research indicates that staff members who feel valued and respected by leadership are productive (Saleem, 2015; Ng, 29017). What is critical is that principals should at any given material times during school hours ensure that the teachers with dissenting voices are listened to and respected. In applying social justice principles, they have to ensure that the ethics of sympathy and empathy are part of the norm (Liou, & Liang ,2021) of their leadership practices.

#### **2.4. Positioning dominant social justice theories in the study**

The hermeneutics of social justice by several scholars is varied (Bogotch, 2002). Though social justice theories are politically related theories, they are apposite in this study because school as social systems (Rawls, 1971) are political structures. The study conducted by Zhang, Goddard and Jakubiec (2018) demonstrates that social justice leadership cannot be segregated from the political, economic and

cultural context of the community. I will now relate these theories in the context of this investigation. As argued, theories of social justice are apposite in education research. This study will deploy the social justice theories of Nancy Fraser and Miranda Fricker. Both these scholars are political and feminist philosophers from the United States of America.

## **2.5. Abusive supervision from Miranda Fricker's perspective**

Miranda Fricker is an American feminist philosopher who advocated social justice. She is a pioneer of social justice and is credited for her scholarly work on epistemic injustice. Her views on this kind of injustice are that there are two kinds of dysfunction in our epistemic practices (which also happens in organizations), which is testimonial injustice and hermeneutic injustice (Fricker 2008). This article is focused on the former type of testimonial transaction. She considers testimony as forming part of fundamental knowledge. In an epistemic transaction, there is the hearer and the speaker. The tendency of hearers to prejudicially listen and perceive themselves as the knowers is injustice. In her paper "Forum on Miranda Fricker's epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing", she maintains that the "speaker who receives a prejudicial deflated degree of credibility from the hearer is wrong. She argues that he is wronged specially in his capacity as a knower" (Fricker, 2008: 61). Fricker posits that this constitutes not only epistemic dysfunction but ethical dysfunction and dilemma.

The tendency of abusive school leaders to suppress the views of teachers with dissenting voices is epistemic silencing and an injustice. Principals who disregard the views of teachers who raise critical questions in the staff meetings perpetuates testimonial injustice. This is a demonstration of the suppression of the voices of the dissent. This example links well with Miranda Fricker's theory of epistemic silencing (Fricker, 2008). This is also further a characteristic of abusive leadership who portrays himself or herself as the only knower and the rest particularly those dissenting voices are less knowers. Such leadership expects subordinates to follow instructions without question. I therefore argue and submit that suppressing the



dissenting voices which are not in line with what the principal wants to hear is unjust and unfair and promotes testimonial injustice which is a serious form of social injustice.

## **2.6. Abusive supervision from Nancy Frasers' perspective of recognition as social justice**

As indicated earlier, Nancy Fraser is also an American political philosopher and a feminist theorist. She advocated 3 dimensions of social justice which are redistribution (economic), recognition (cultural) and representation (political) (Fraser, 2003; Cazden, 2012; Cazden, 2017). She is further recognized as one of the leading theorists within the 1990s recognition theoretical turn and works with analysis of contemporary societal developments from a normative informed position (Dahl, Stoltz & Willig, 2004). In this article I am focusing on the social justice dimension of recognition and deem it fit for application in this thesis. Fraser (2000) is of the view that the claim for recognition is more complex in educational contexts and meaning than the other claim of redistribution. Recognition according to her has to do with identity politics and locating this in the context the arguments of abusive leadership, it can be argued that silencing the voices of dissent teachers can be construed as misrecognition.

The act of suppressing the dissenting views is deliberate and abusive leaders perceive those who desire to be informed of the school matters as troublesome, unsupportive, and having a hidden agenda. Deliberately sidelining, avoiding, or silencing teachers with views that are construed as dissenting by the principal is misrecognition. In a democratic, social system like the school, all role-players have the rights to raise misgivings on any matter that they feel needs attention and clarity from the office of school leadership. Fraser (2000) posits that what requires recognition is not group-specific identity but the status of individual group members as full partners in social interaction. Claims for recognition are aimed not at valorising group identity but rather at overcoming subordination. Redressing misrecognition now means changing social institutions--or, more specifically, changing the interaction-regulating values that impede participation at all relevant institutional sites. To Fricker (2018) the

notion of recognition is an ethical potent resource for understanding human relational needs and its negative counterpart, misrecognition is an equally potent resource for critique. Recognition of subordinates by the leadership is critical and builds self-esteem, self-respect, and self-confidence. Such an idea might itself be seen to apply at the same three levels to indicate: first, basic epistemic self-confidence; second, our status as epistemically responsible; and third, a certain epistemic self-esteem that reflects the epistemic esteem we receive from others (Fricker, 2018). Teachers who feel recognised are likely to be supportive and productive. It is therefore of critical value to ensure that all staff members or role players are recognised by the leader despite their viewpoints. Suppressing the dissenting views does not solve anything but a recipe for conflict and mistrust which will destabilize and demobilize the school. The recognition element represents human beings as differentiating and valuing themselves essentially in relation to others, and when that mode of relating affirms our sense of self appropriately we have recognition (Fricker, 2018). It is therefore critical that school leadership accept that subordinates bring different personalities, and some are quite and others vocal. Abusive leadership tends to be intimidating and subject subordinate into silence in which many use as a strategy to avoid consequences and victimization.

### **3. Conclusion**

The main purpose of this study was to provide an analysis of abusive school leadership and how they relate with teachers who see things differently voices. This paper is a conceptual argument, and, in its examination, I explored various scholarly work which are apposite to the study. This paper was organized into various sections, after introducing the study, attention was then given to conceptualizing, characterizing and identification of abusive school leadership. In this section, I provided how abusive school leadership behave. Attempts was also made to define and describe this type of school leadership. Following that, analysis of the harmful ramifications of abusive supervision was also explored. The next section concentrated on the

understanding of the construct social justice and expectations from social justice leaders. In the next section, I then provided an exploration of apposite and dominant social justice theories which undergirded the study. These theories are advocated by American political social justice philosophers Miranda Fricker and Nancy Fraser.

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