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Educators' subjective experiences of workplace bullying within a perceived neoliberalist education system

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Teachers in South Africa experience exceptionally high levels of bullying in the workplace, in particular, bullying that relates to their profession. As research has shown that the organisational culture can either inhibit or promote bullying, in this paper we consider the possibility that neoliberalism creates an environment for workplace bullying to thrive. Based on unstructured interviews with 4 educators, we draw parallels between what they subjectively perceived as workplace bullying within the hierarchal structure of the school and school system and the ideology of neoliberalism. The value of this study lies in the awareness that it could raise among managers in the education system of how the system actually influences their mind-set and actions.

Keywords: education management; neoliberalism; performativity; teacher victimisation; workplace bullying

Introduction

Educators in South Africa are generally under immense pressure for various reasons, such as school violence (Grobler, 2019) and learner misbehaviour (LeeFon, Jacobs, Le Roux & De Wet, 2013). Many schools are regarded as underperforming (Coetzee, 2014; Jacobs, 2018) and the teaching profession is often heavily criticised by the public (Robinson, 2019). Annually, pressure mounts on learners and schools involved in the Grade 12 examinations. Results of schools and districts are compared, and those that perform poorly in national or standardised examinations are often named and shamed in the press and on social media. Under the hashtag, #MatricResults2018 on Twitter, for instance, names of schools that performed poorly are mentioned, and results of districts and provinces are compared and criticised. Research findings suggest that although workplace bullying (WPB) of educators is a real problem across the world (De Wet & Jacobs, 2018), compared to their counterparts, educators in South Africa experience exceptionally high levels of victimisation (De Wet & Jacobs, 2013).

Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf and Cooper (2011:22) explain WPB as “harassing, offending, or socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone’s work.” For a variety of reasons the victims find themselves in a weaker position than the perpetrator. Although interpersonal victimisation is typically cited when discussing WPB (e.g. De Wet & Jacobs, 2013), some forms of WPB relate to the organisation and organisational culture. Indeed, De Wet and Jacobs (2013) have found that the most common form of WPB that South African educators endure relates to their profession. The fact that WPB of educators is so commonplace in South Africa, across post-levels, school types, school size, and various school settings (Jacobs & De Wet, 2015), suggests that the organisation at large could be an enabler of bullying. As Jacobs (2017) argues, certain conditions enable, or inhibit a culture of bullying.

Although a number of studies focusing on WPB of South African educators have been published over the last decade (e.g. De Wet, 2010; Phooko, Meyer, Fourie & Kirsten, 2017; Woudstra, Janse van Rensburg, Visser & Jordaan, 2018) and some international studies have focused on the school as organisation being a risk factor (De Wet & Jacobs, 2018), we were unable to find studies focusing on the role of the larger education organisation in South Africa enabling WPB.

As in many other countries around the world, the transformation of South African education in the 1990s followed a neoliberal path, with the logic of the market and business reducing South African education to a clinical activity. This was a direct result of the government adopting and embracing neoliberal and business-friendly macro-economic policies (Ashman, Fine & Newman, 2011). With an increase in corporate culture at South African education institutions (Waghid, 2008), and the establishment of an education policy discourse concomitant to the neoliberal orientations (Fataar, 2000), managers in the education system no longer assume the responsibility of partners in the education of children. Rather, provincial, district, and school managers became allocators of resources and data collectors who are driven to ensure that targets are met, and that the activities of educators are appropriate and in line with the needs of the school and the education system. Driven by the over-arching objective of achieving the set targets, education managers might find themselves compelled to act in unsympathetic, demanding and anti-democratic ways (Bottery, 2004). In our attempt to make sense of the pressure on schools, we discuss neoliberalism as an ideology. We then consider to what extent the perceived WPB of a small group of educators can be related to a neoliberalist approach.

Neoliberalism and Education

Neoliberalism originated in the 1970s with the financial crisis of the Western world. It promotes the radical transformation of the entire society (Giroux, 2012) and it dominates, informs, and defines how most countries organise their economies and social policies (Small, 2009). We draw from Harvey (2007:2) who defines neoliberalism as a theory of political economic practices, which proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. As such, it regards public activities (including education) as commodities that should be guided and informed by the logic of the market and open-market principles.

Neoliberalism is entrenched in the education practice, profession, policy, and reform all over the world (Ball, 2003; Maistry, 2014). This not only resulted in the commodification, commercialisation, and the marketisation of education (Angus, 2017), but also in an instrumentalist view of education (Maistry, 2014). Subsequently, the mandate of education focuses on realising economic goals, serving the economy and providing a skilled labour force that would contribute towards the local and global economy. Education thus became market driven and increasingly competitive (Ball, 2015; Bradford & Shields, 2017; Robertson, 2008).

Driven by the neoliberalist mind-set, managers hope to achieve more by applying corporate management logic, which is based on “autocratic, hierarchical and ... top-down management” principles (Taylor, 2017:113). Neoliberal organisations are often predominantly centralised and use measurable outcomes and strong control (Bradford & Shields, 2017; Robertson, 2008) to ensure that targets are achieved. This control is exerted through managerialism, also referred to as governmentality (a range of procedures and techniques used to guide and control conduct) (Perryman, Ball, Braun & Maguire, 2017) and performativity (a culture of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons, rewards, and sanctions) (Ball, 2003). As education is presented as a quantifiable act focused on the achievement of targets, emphasis is placed on standardised tests (Small, 2009), high-stakes testing (Bradford & Shields, 2017), and other accountability measures. These manifest through target-setting, continuous data collection, performance review, excessive report writing, regular publication of results, and site visits and inspections, which indicate technologies of performativity. Within this managerialist mind-set, incentives and sanctions are used to reward appropriate behaviour and punish what is regarded as poor performance (Ball, 2003; Stevenson & Wood, 2013).

This neoliberalist environment results in an increase in the power differential between educa-

tors and education managers at various levels. Managers for whom performance is important, and who might also be subjected to appraisal and scrutiny, disregard freedom and autonomy (Ball, 2003) and apply authoritarian and coercive measures, exerting control over those in lesser positions to ensure that the school, district, or province moves in the desired direction (Bessant, Robinson & Ormerod, 2015; Perryman et al., 2017). In education, neoliberalism thrives in a climate of fear: fear of the consequences of poor performance, fear of excessive surveillance and monitoring, and fear of not being awarded a salary increase. For principals, for instance, the fear of having departmental officials visiting their schools on a regular basis or being publicly named and shamed results in them doing whatever is necessary to get better results from educators and learners. This, we believe creates a space that resonates with WPB, which requires scrutiny.

We therefore analysed data generated through a series of systematic discussions with four educators over a period of six months, to see if what they experience as WPB behaviour towards them can be linked to a neoliberalist mindset.

Method

The research design for this study is what Bruce, Beuthin, Sheilds, Molzahn and Schick-Makaroff (2016:2) regard as an “emergent design” which is characterised by “evolving data collection” and changing procedures. As we focused on the participants’ stories, “seeking to understand and interpret, focusing on the particular, and using the story as an anchor of analysis,” it can be classified as a narrative inquiry approach (Bruce et al., 2016:3). It started with a series of conversations with two of the participants to understand their lived experiences as teachers in present-day South Africa. Their narratives led to focused discussions on what they subjectively perceived and experienced as WPB within the system. The first two participants then introduced us to the other two participants, with whom the interactions were shorter, and more focused on the topic of WPB. This is what Merriam (2009:79) classifies as network sampling. At all stages the participants were made aware that they should in no way feel compelled to take part, or to continue with the conversations if they choose not to (AERA Code of Ethics: American Educational Research Association approved by the AERA Council February 2011, 2011; Merriam, 2009).

Three of the participants were female and one was male. Two of them were heads of departments, and two were teachers – all from secondary schools. One of the teachers taught at a private school after having resigned from a public school, while the other three taught at urban public schools. We do not claim that there is any potential to generalise our findings, as the participants do not re-

flect the possible pool of participants. Firstly, it must be noted that it is not easy to identify and recruit participants on difficult topics such as forms of bullying. Secondly, we do not claim that other versions of the truth do not exist, as victimisation is a subjective experience (Mahuteau & Zhu, 2015). We simply present the data as the lived experiences of a small number of educators and interpret these subjectivities through the lens of neoliberalism. Still, we do believe that others might be able to identify with the narratives, as these kinds of accounts are not uncommon, also in other parts of the world.

The data was generated through interviews in the form of lengthy conversations with two of the participants about the frustrations and joys of being a teacher and, among other things, on what they perceived as WPB. In the other two cases, once-off discussions took place, focusing specifically on examples where they had felt bullied. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the study. They voluntarily consented to participate and for the conversations to be recorded, transcribed, and used (AERA Code of Ethics: American Educational Research Association approved by the AERA Council February 2011, 2011; Merriam, 2009). The transcriptions were afterwards forwarded to the participants via e-mail to confirm the content, and where necessary, clarification was requested. Such member checking is regarded as a way of ensuring credibility (Merriam, 2009). As neither of us were in any way connected to basic education or involved in the schools of teachers participating in this study, we had no power to influence participants' decisions to participate or not. Participants gave permission for the data to be used, and we assured them that their identities, as well as the identities of their schools, would not be disclosed (AERA Code of Ethics: American Educational Research Association approved by the AERA Council February 2011, 2011). Thus, we needed to strike a balance between providing enough information to ensure an authentic audit trail, and not disclosing detail that could lead to identification, or even speculation about the identities of the schools or the individuals (Merriam, 2009). We analysed the data, specifically focusing on themes that emerged according to types of bullying that occurred, and provide direct quotes, using pseudonyms, to elucidate our claims. A draft of the paper was forwarded to the participants to ensure that our interpretations of the conversations were in line with what was intended (Merriam, 2009).

Results

A number of themes related to WPB within the system emerged. Although we categorised experiences in themes, we need to point out that many of these are interrelated.

Unfair Demands and Expectations

The first theme relates to what participants perceive as unreasonable expectations of educators. John felt that the expectations to teach large classes were unfair. He quit teaching at a public school after three years, mainly due to the large classes he had to teach.

I felt completely overwhelmed during my first three years of teaching, specifically due to the large number of learners in the classes, and the fact that the school was packed with learners, way more than was supposed to be in the school. I had to teach up to 40 learners in one class, and I found it extremely difficult. I believe that the department of education is bullying teachers when they expect teachers to teach such large classes.

In some cases, the expectations related to teachers' workloads. Sarah shared that she taught "extra classes every single afternoon, Tuesday to Friday." What makes the situation worse, is the perceived inconsistencies regarding as the workload and responsibilities: "I feel that I am being treated differently from one of my colleagues." Ruth shared that she would often be the last staff member to leave due to her workload: "I stay at school until very late most evenings." It seems as though male managers perceived that it was acceptable to expect of women to work harder than their male counterparts. Sarah said:

One of the male teachers that teaches the same grades as I, does not offer a single extra class. He is not required to help with the extra classes, he does not have to do all the paperwork! All just because he coaches sport – which I do too.

Ruth complained that some of the male colleagues, in particular, would comment "that they cannot stay at school until late because unlike me, they have wives. Sometimes they would comment that I do not have a life." She shared that others would laugh, as if it were normal that some worked harder than others, and that not a single male manager would reprimand them.

Ruth also lamented that the policy on progression placed even more demands on schools. She explained that "a learner can only be unsuccessful once in a three-year phase. This means that a large number of learners are progressed at the end of their Grade 11 year, without having mastered the work." If they then did not perform well enough in the preliminary examinations, they are not allowed to write the end-of-year examinations, but are then "given the chance to write these exams in May-June of the next year, BUT there is no support from the DBE [Department of Basic Education] for the subjects that they failed. The responsibility thus becomes the schools' to monitor these learners." Although she believed that the driving force behind this was also an attempt to get better results to show the public, she shared her support for the system in principle, "I love the idea of a modular ap-

proach,” but she felt strongly that “*the Department should provide support to these learners in the form of evening classes – and not force schools to make it their problem.*”

Exploitation, unfair treatment and giving staff members more work than they can manage are regarded as WPB (De Wet & Jacobs, 2013; Namie & Namie, 2011; Simon & Simon, 2006). Neoliberalism is not focused on people and their specific needs, and results in a devaluation of relationships, emotion, interdependence (Bradford & Shields, 2017), and a disregard of leadership and compassion. It is a fixation on achieving the set targets and outcomes (Ball, 2015) as are clear from the above experiences of educators. Ball (2003) argues that performativity erodes and replaces authentic relations with judgemental relations where people are valued only in terms of their productivity and contribution to the success of the school, district, and province; thus, expecting teachers to unreasonably work hard, is normalised.

The pressure to present extra classes and the perceived lack of support from the DBE are all forms of “technologies” (Ball, 2003:216) employed by neoliberalism to ensure that targets are reached, and as punishment of teachers for not doing their work. The responsibility of learners passing their grades becomes the sole responsibility of the teacher, as the drive for good results puts “undue pressure on teachers” (Angus, 2017:340). As such, not to “bear the risks and responsibilities of the failing child or the failing school” (Attick, 2017:43), Sarah and Ruth need to teach extra classes and stay at work until very late in the evenings. Sarah also has to bear with unfair treatment and mockery by colleagues.

Top-Down Decisions

It seems as though various managers take decisions and then force them upon schools and educators without taking their autonomy and individual contexts into account. Ana shared how her plans to manage the marking of scripts in her department were effectively wiped off the table through a top-down instruction:

Before each exam, a marking management plan (MMP) must be drawn up by each of the HODs [Heads of Departments] of a school, and this must be available when the exams are monitored by the district officials. When drawing up my department’s MMP, I consulted with my staff, took into account the number of papers each is marking, and also other circumstances. My understanding was that apart from certain non-negotiable dates, HODs have the autonomy to draw up their plans. In June 2018, the provincial Grade 9 maths paper was written on the Tuesday before the school closed on the Friday. One teacher in my department [had study leave], and hence we agreed that his marks would be ready on the first day of the third term. The next day (the Wednesday) we received a phone call referring to an e-mail (which

we had never received) asking for all the scripts and mark sheets of all the Grade 9 subjects that had written provincial papers. It is important that I mention that the e-mail sent by the District Office (which we had not received), was per instruction from the Provincial Head Office, which the district had only received that week.

Ana pointed out a number of other related issues, including that specific schools, instead of selecting a representative sample, were targeted by the district office: “[more than 80% of the schools that were targeted] were *English-medium ex Model C schools.*” The teachers were required to mark more than 300 scripts apart from their other marking and invigilation, and to do the question analysis within two days. She tried to take a stand against the heavy marking load, “*I told the Deputy Principal responsible for liaising with the district office [DO] on academics that I am not putting further pressure on my staff, and will not send anything to the district office.*” The Deputy Principal, however, gave her no choice. “*I feel that in the situation the district office was bullied by the head office, and then the DO bullied my line manager resulting in her bullying me to bully my staff. This is not acceptable.*”

Piotrowski and King (2016) indicate that line managers in hierarchical organisations domineer and control in manners that resonate with WPB. Neoliberalism tends to disregard the complex relationship that exists between teachers and managers, or between schools and the district, and realities at ground level. This results in cold, empty and flat relationships (Angus, 2017). Simmie (2012) claims that under neoliberalism, the concept of the collective and the role of social democratic principles, including care and concern for others, have become marginalised – management rams performativity into the day-to-day practices of educators and into social relations (Ball, 2003). It is within a context of self-interest, competition, managerialism, and productivity that fertile conditions for WPB are created.

Unrealistic Pressure to Perform

Another issue discussed by participants was unrealistic pressure to perform. Ana explained:

The situation at our school is that our learners come from more than 20 feeder schools and, particularly in Mathematics, they are at different levels. We work very hard with them, but we never achieve a 100% pass rate in Maths. Many of our kids come from poor ... working-class households. Some kids come to school hungry, and although we have a feeding scheme, it is limited. Some cannot afford the calculator they need to have. It is not the same with kids who have resources at home. So, when stats are compared, they are compared unqualified with kids from privileged schools.

Ruth shared a similar view:

At each and every district meeting we get told how we should perform, what the aim of the district is.

We get hammered with comparable statistics in terms of the district averages and performance rates. At every cluster peer support group meeting we hear again and again what the targets are. I do not believe it is fair to compare us with [privileged] schools where the learners come from one or two good feeder primary schools, where parents are professionals, and have the means to support their children at a level far beyond what our parents can do.

Worth and Squelch (2015:1016), drawing from the International Labour Organization's description, rightly include "irrational and unfair" demands as part of WPB. Neoliberal education unfairly focuses on so-called "failing" schools and it views the "teacher-as-the-problem" (Angus, 2017:339), because he/she was not competent enough (Attick, 2017), irrespective of the impact of contextual factors on teaching and learning (Angus, 2017). The classification and stigmatising of schools as "failing" or "dysfunctional" also serve as an implicit form of punishment (De Lissovoy & Cedillo, 2016). Hence, Stevenson and Wood (2013) observe that one consequence of the increased importance of learner performance and the subsequent judgemental approach towards teacher's work is the substantial transfer of power and authority to the managers. Where underperformance and failure are attributed to (teacher) laziness, a lack of drive, motivation, and intelligence (Leyva, 2009, in Simmie, 2012), exerting undue power or coercion is seemingly justified. Since teachers are blamed for the poor performance of the school, the policing of the school and the teacher becomes a mechanism to raise standards. Resulting from this is a "much more coercive and aggressive approach to management" (Stevenson & Wood, 2013:52). Within such a "punish-oriented context" (Bottery, 2004:90), education managers' behaviour could potentially become excessively directive and instructional, and to a large extent also coercive.

Not Receiving Correct Information on Time

Ruth felt that their provincial education department sometimes failed to provide correct information on time. This resulted in chopping and changing of schedules. She shared how, towards "the end of 2018, all schools had to draw up a complete and detailed management plan for 2019, in a prescribed format, that had to include dates of the exams as prescribed by the detailed management plan of the district office." Her assumption was that the district management plan was informed by the provincial management plan, as specific dates for the exams were provided. According to their plan, the "preliminary exams were scheduled to start on 26 August, with the practicals scheduled a week earlier." These were in line with the annual teaching plan (ATP), but "according to the ATP received via the District Office from the Provincial Authori-

ties, Grade 12 teachers should be teaching NEW content until 8 August." However, during the second term of 2019, a different instruction was issued.

The week of 10–14 June (the schools closed on 14 June) a district memo and [numbered provincial examination instruction] arrived, informing the school that the first provincial exam is on 19 August (one week earlier), and that the first district paper should be written on 8 August. Currently this is causing a feeling of panic and anger. I will not have time in class even to discuss the June papers and the errors learners had made. I will have to rush through [the remaining work]. So, I will have to schedule a lot of afternoon classes to work through the prelim papers, putting pressure on Matrics who also want to attend other subjects' afternoon classes.

Namie and Namie (2011) point out that WPB includes interference with the tasks of staff members. In addition, the above actions resonate with what Simon and Simon (2006:143) call "setting someone up to fail." Within the process of managerialism dissidence is suppressed and compliance and acceptance ensured through the "panoply of managerial control" (Stevenson & Wood, 2013:52), which creates fear.

Being Treated as a Mindless Source of Information

What was evident from the interviews was that educators were subjected to many seemingly mindless administrative tasks that did not require any form of qualification. Ana mentioned the following:

I sometimes feel as if I have to spend my days doing tasks that really do not need any skills. In particular, I have to complete one form after the other. One does not even need to be qualified to be able to complete those forms. And I feel that nothing happens to those forms, because a week later, we will get a request for the same information, just on another form.

Ruth complained about the same thing:

Although I understand the tracking of the learners is supposed to keep on informing the schools of the support needed, because of big classes and full ATPs, the constant forms being completed become a tick list that we type and retype and send in.

De Wet and Jacobs (2013:457) point out that "being ordered to do work below [his/her] level of competence" is part of WPB, and reflects what De Lissovoy and Cedillo (2016:3) regard as "regimes of accountability." These regimes require of teachers to perform stripped-down and behaviourist activities. They promote accountability through the tracking of students and the auditability of teacher activities, because only that which is documented is regarded as "legitimate teaching activity" (Besley & Peters, 2006:823). The mindless activities also resemble a reduction of what teachers do or is supposed to do – namely to teach. Lewis and Hardy (2014, in Angus, 2017:340) maintain that neoliberal-

alism “discursively constitute[s] the teacher as a performative subject – not merely changing what teachers do, but also ultimately who teachers are.”

Autocratic Management Style

Pressure on principals seems to force them to revert to autocratic management styles. Sarah shared a story about a colleague who taught in a temporary classroom space, which was constructed due to the shortage of classrooms for all the learners. The colleague complained that the space was too small and not ventilated, and that effective teaching and learning in the space was impossible. The colleague’s observation “*that she is quite sure that the classrooms were not in line with requirements such as the Occupational Safety Act,*” was not received well.

The next morning in the staff room, the principal was extremely rude. He stated that if anybody was not satisfied with their classroom, they could opt to float [use other staff members’ classrooms on periods when these are available]. He also said that staff should not threaten him with legal action.

Although she admitted that she understood the dilemma of a lack of classroom space, she felt that “*the principal clearly sent the message that if you do go to him to complain about something that bothers, he will humiliate you.*” John shared a similar narrative:

When I complained about [the large classes], it was simply said that I was not able to manage my class. I often saw teachers leaving their classrooms in tears, or even going home in tears.

Blase and Blase (2004) acknowledge that school principals in particular are under immense pressure, resulting in the mistreatment of teachers. The above responses display a typical neoliberal orientation, as pressure is put on teachers to teach large classes (Attick, 2017), and to accept that they have to “do more with less” (Van der Walt, 2017:4). Sarah’s experience above resembles a neoliberal authoritarian, hierarchical, top-down management approach. Taylor (2017) claims that within a neoliberal structure, management does not need to consult with workers and workers are not entitled to question or challenge decisions. Decisions made by management are simply dictated to teachers. John was blamed for being unable to manage his class, regardless of the circumstances under which he was expected to teach (Blackmore, 2019).

Interfering with the Functionality of the School

It seems that at times, decisions by education authorities interfere and undermine the functionality of the school. Ruth shared the following:

I am involved with the disciplinary committee of my school. We really take care to follow procedure, and explore all avenues with the learners, but once in a while the case is so serious that, in the end, we suspend a learner, and recommend that he/she gets expelled. It happened this year that a learner who was selling drugs on the school premises was sus-

pending, and the disciplinary committee of the SGB [School Governing Body] requested the Head of Department to expel the learner. The suspension was upheld but because the learner is in Grade 12 he was not removed from the school and we were instructed that he had to complete his matric year at our school.

The learner then intimidated and threatened the prefects (“*I will kill you!*”), as he assumed that they were the ones who got him into trouble. Ruth also indicated that “*the [subtle] message [to the learners and staff] was: if you are in matric, you can sell drugs and threaten the learner leadership*” without consequence. This had a negative impact on the functionality of the disciplinary system at the school.

Ana shared how the multiple examination opportunities (MEO) (cf. Department of Basic Education, 2017) afforded to learners and others to write the National Senior Certificate during June at schools and not at a central point, and under conditions as instructed by the authorities, had a negative impact on the functionality of the school in terms of managing their examination invigilation.

We had to manage three different timetables. The GET [General Education and Training] learners still had to be in normal teaching for one week, and the FET [Further Education and Training] learners were writing exams and the Grade 12 MEO learners were writing separate exams. The papers had to be fetched daily by two teachers at centralised venues, taking away two senior staff members from the school. We had to set up a special venue for the MEO learners, and there had to be two staff members invigilating (at times there would only be one MEO learner writing). Then again two teachers had to take the scripts back to the collection point. This created a capacity problem. Often there would not be a single staff member not invigilating for the first 2 hours of the day, implying that even all the Chief Examination Officers were busy with normal invigilation, and none available if a crisis or irregularity would occur.

The above resonates with what De Wet and Jacobs (2013:457) call “making [him/her] responsible for more work than [the school] can manage,” but also with what De Wet (2010:1458) calls a “hierarchical, bureaucratic and rule-orientated” organisation. This organisation, and the teachers within it, are conceived as simply responsive to external requirements (Ball, 2003). Furthermore, the autocratic “command and control” (Taylor, 2017:117) structure within which neoliberalism functions allows for particular decisions to be made with the expectation that these will be implemented without any deliberation and or resistance; without consideration for internal realities and needs.

Discussion

Neoliberalism reduces every human action to a competitive, economic action (Attick, 2017) fuelled by values of individualism, competition, and consumption (Bradford & Shields, 2017:15). Social

relations among members of society (for instance, those among educators and pupils, and parents and the school) are subsequently reduced to that of service provider or supplier and customer subjected to market principles. Ball (2015:259) asserts that neoliberalism leads us to “know” and value others by their outputs, rather than by their humanity. Because it absolutizes the economy, neoliberalism creates a space where exclusion, domination, and exploitation thrive (Giroux, 2012; Robertson, 2008). Neoliberalism, by its nature, is hegemonic (Attick, 2017).

Conclusion

Taking the high levels of WPB, and the daily (often unsuccessful) struggle of those who need to perform in line with the expectations of the South African society into consideration, we attempted to explain the phenomenon by considering the extent to which the national drive to comply and perform can be regarded as WPB of educators. Indeed, within a neoliberalist environment, the organisational culture and management style in the education system resembles WPB. At times, education managers appear to have no choice but to engage in acts that relate to WPB.

We should emphasise that we do not judge any of the different role players in the school system, but merely point out the parallels between neoliberalism and WPB of educators. A definite limitation of the paper is that we did not interview participants other than teachers, such as departmental officials at various levels, principals, or labour, thus not obtaining maximum variation (Merriam, 2009). We furthermore do not claim that neoliberalism is the only reason why educators in South Africa, and across the globe, experience bullying at work. Still, the value of this study, we believe, lies in raising awareness among educational managers and those who research education policy and management of how the system could potentially influence mind sets and actions. The question that Taysum and Murrell Aberly (2017) ask about Guyana might well be applicable here – how does one expect teachers to be agents of change and create opportunities for real empowerment in their classrooms, if they themselves are slaves to performativity and conformity?

Authors' Contributions

KLGT wrote the theoretical part on neoliberalism and education. LJ conducted the interviews, analysed the data and completed the results, discussion, and conclusion. Both authors reviewed the final manuscript.

Note

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