

I submit this document of some of my experiences to the inquiry, as a recount of events that I experienced. I believe they illustrate some examples of Bullying within the Educational Workplace in Queensland. The experiences are recounted to the best of my belief and memory.

I qualified as a Primary school teacher in 1985. Until 1997 I worked in NSW at a number of schools as a teacher. In 1997 I moved to Queensland, where I commenced work for Education Queensland, initially on a teaching contract but gained a permanent position within a few months. Subsequent to moving to Queensland I have gained double Masters of Education degrees and pursued a significant number of professional development opportunities independently.

Many things were different in the Queensland system. One of the major differences I noted was as a result of attendances at staff meetings at approximately three local primary schools. I noted that the Principal led these meetings and staff rarely contributed. 'Collaboration' appeared to mean presentation of a pre-determined idea and universal agreement by the staff, then often 'gossip' in small groups after the event. I had not experienced this in NSW, where staff were often quite vocal during staff meetings. I also noted that the Principal was regarded as the main source of information, with an acceptance of their expertise in a wide range of curricula, pedagogy and administrative areas. In NSW I had felt there to be far more delegation of areas of expertise.

To a larger extent I 'flew below the radar' and followed the same model, with no problems. I did not express personal opinions in any public forum. After approximately three years I took a position as an Advisory Visiting Teacher: Behaviour Management, servicing a cohort of 6 primary schools and 2 secondary schools. This frequently brought me into closer contact with Principals and other Administrative staff at the schools. With most I found a good degree of cooperation and communication. I eventually had problems with two Principals of the larger schools in this coalition. I would allege that this occurred as a direct result of:

- My having refused to sign paperwork suggesting I had worked with a 14 year old student who the school wished to exclude when I had not in fact worked with him
- Upon inquiry when he was no longer at the school a week later I was told that he had returned to live with his father in NZ
- Some months later when operating in a volunteer fire fighting role I attended a fire on the property where this boy was living. His stepfather spoke to me about him not being able to go to any school because he had been excluded from all Education Qld schools. He had never returned to NZ and the stepfather did not appear to have any awareness of where this idea would come from – they didn't know where the father was.
- I inquired about the situation when I returned to school and was told he had not been excluded, but to their knowledge had returned to NZ.

From this time onwards it was clear to me that I was denied access to information and I would allege I was given trivial work to undertake as part of my role. This eventually led to me feeling quite ostracised and de-valued at this school. I formed the opinion that I was frequently lied to. During this time, my role at this school was re-defined by the Principal without negotiation or collaboration

with me. There appeared to be no policies or procedures in place to define exactly what the role involved – it was at the Principal’s discretion, so I became a well-paid teacher aide. Some other staff saw me of little value. Some acknowledged the difficulties I faced.

I would suggest that as a result of this my name started to become somewhat ‘blackened’ at the meetings of Principals at coalitions. On one occasion I was asked by another Principal (B) of a smaller school what I had done to upset Principal A.

Shortly later the Principal (C) of the other larger school in the coalition also decided my role at his school should be changed. I found when I visited that school on a regular weekly basis, he would usually say there was nothing for me to do. After spending some time there undertaking administrative tasks or trying to assist the staff with whom I felt I could be of some assistance, I would return to my base school. Inevitably on return to my base I would receive a phone call (usually just before 3pm) from the Principal regarding an issue that had arisen through the day (while I was there) about which I knew nothing. He would require my assistance the next day.

Initially I would do this, until I felt it was all some sort of ‘game’. Other people sharing the room at my base school recognised this pattern and found it quite amusing. Whilst I still have a good relationship with all of them – and it is still the subject of amusement, I found it quite professionally demeaning. Eventually I avoided going back to the school the next day, having realised that any ‘friendly’ discussion with the Principal was not going to alter his strategy.

On one occasion when I did go to the school the following day, the student in question (approx. 16 years old) wrote a statement (in my presence) regarding an allegation that a teacher at the school had made inappropriate sexual advances to a girl in the class which he had witnessed. He alleged this to be the cause of his outburst the previous day. I made no comment regarding this allegation, but handed the statement to the Principal for him to follow up.

When I returned the following week it was alleged this student had left the school. From this point, I felt Principal C became openly hostile towards me. I also (on reflection) note a pattern with the events that occurred with Principal A.

Shortly after this I was eventually told by a supportive Principal (D) that my role would not be continuing the following year. Principal (E), who was the Principal of my base school had been nominated to tell me this, but she had not felt able to do so. She had asked me what my intentions were and on her advice, I had attended a meeting with the Area staffing personnel. When the transfers for the following year arrived, I was to remain in the same position – not having been given a transfer.

With hindsight I realize now that this caused quite a degree of unrest within the coalition. I was aware something was going on, but did not know what. I asked various staff on occasions. Had I been told the situation by the Principal, I would most certainly have asked more specific questions of the Area staff. On one occasion, with a witness who was in much the same position we asked an Area employee. We were given quite a definite response that our positions were to remain. We took this to be true. My friend also found himself ‘jobless but not unemployed’ in subsequent weeks. After employment in minimal roles, he eventually resigned in a similar health state to myself.

Within a short time of this I was advised by one of the more sympathetic Principals what was actually happening – the position was not to remain. This caused me enormous distress and I went home. Upon following it up I felt that initially the Area office did not have the information from the Coalition of schools. They led me to believe that I had not been given a transfer because all was to remain the same the following year.

Upon following it up, within a couple of days this story had changed. Area personnel denied having given me the advice I alleged. They had no position available for me at that stage, but said they would look at what was left after the round of offers to new graduates went out. This may not occur until the commencement of the next school year. At this time I strongly felt that various personnel had received different advice and when things began to pan badly, they collaborated in order to protect each other.

Upon placing a claim with Workcover (which was rejected on the grounds of Reasonable Management), I found it alleged that meetings, advice and phone calls had occurred, which I would absolutely deny. Diary entries were submitted, the accuracy of which I would challenge. I had also sought the support of the Queensland Teachers Union, but found them to be substantially unsupportive. I felt like ‘the little man – all alone’.

My mental health status declined significantly. I felt strongly that the witness statements given by people supporting me were totally overlooked and what I felt were lies and fabrications were accepted. I was privately told by Principal D that the two Principals of the larger schools had railroaded the situation and he felt that he and the other Principals (some acting) of smaller schools had accepted this in order to maintain the peace. He reported having attempted to defend me on one occasion and had then felt quite ostracised himself. He also suggested that the acting Principals would not have felt empowered to speak up, because they knew this would affect their future promotional appointment chances.

I found the idea that people were willing to allow quite serious victimisation to occur, simply to enhance their professional opportunities quite appalling and made the decision I would not return to Education Queensland when offered a position the following year. I resigned, with quite poor mental health some months later and my resignation has been ‘flagged’ as a result.

Having resigned, I quite quickly regained my health and undertook a number of volunteer and personal employment roles. My medical support staff were highly supportive, encouraging but also exhibited a strong degree of the frequency of them hearing stories such as mine. I did not feel it was the profession, the children, the curriculum nor the normal requirements of the job that caused my distress. Rather I felt it to be the actions of some people. Interestingly, I noted that in all cases a part of their defence was to make claim that my distress was caused by my inability to cope with any of the above.

After some time, due to financial need I started to work within Brisbane Catholic Education. I expected this to be a more supportive and ethical employer.

Once more, I found the behaviours of the Principal directly affected the way the school was managed. It appeared to me that there was little real accountability. I observed that when this was required, it was frequently fabricated. For the first couple of years, with Principal Z I taught

successfully and with respect in a classroom. I said little – just got on with my job. Principal Y was appointed in the second year I was at this school. Whilst I found him quite ‘bullish’ with an obvious preference for younger, more athletically inclined teachers I pursued my duties with diligence – quite successfully. I was offered a further contract for the following year, which I verbally accepted. I was told by Principal Y that he would endeavour to gain me permanency.

Following this, a position as Support Teacher: Inclusive Education was advertised. As I had specialised qualifications in this area (M.Ed), I decided to apply. Upon receipt of my application the Principal approached me, telling me that if I was successful in gaining that job he would never get me permanency. He wanted me in the classroom. The class for the following year had been organised and children with specific difficulties relating to my areas of expertise had been put in the class deliberately. Their parents had been told I would be their teacher.

I began to feel highly distressed and consulted some peers. On their advice, I decided I would still go ahead with the application as it was a career move for me. I won the ST:IE job, but the Principal was clearly not supportive of this – telling me to think seriously about whether or not I should accept it as it would definitely affect my future prospects. I decided to take the job.

The job had been a 3 day a week contract funded by BCE, plus 2 days a week funded by the school. At the start of the next year the school funded days were withdrawn – money being put elsewhere.

Throughout this year I had incredible support of my peers and also an Advisor in the area from BCE. Without this, I would have relapsed into poor mental health. I was constantly subjected to verbal demands by the Principal – both in front of my peers and privately. I avoided any individual contact with him. I was told it was my job to get the state testing marks of the school up, or he would consider me unsuccessful in my role. This caused a nun, who had heard the demand to say to me “My goodness Liz, he does think you have broad shoulders in order to bear the weight on the entire school.” (Approx 600 students). Whilst I took this in the spirit she meant it, I have always felt quite distressed by it, because it was clear that others could see what was happening and were willing to support me privately, they were afraid to stand up for me in public.

This was the year of the Federal Government’s apology relating to ‘The Stolen Generation’. With some staff, we were watching this on a television in the staffroom. Many staff were in another part of the staffroom – some make quite disparaging comments. For at least 5 of us watching, it had some personal meaning and we wanted to continue to watch it. Staff prayer was called and we were ordered to go by the Principal. The 5 of us who were watching the apology remained where we were. I had made the decision this would be my ‘spiritual devotion’ for the day. Shortly later the Principal came back and demanded we leave the staffroom and attend the staff prayer, which we did. I was distressed. At least two others were crying.

Following this, I sent the Principal an email to describe my distress. I could not face him personally. He responded with a deflection of blame to another person. That person approached me down the track and invited me to run a Staff Prayer surrounding the indigenous spirituality, which I did with great passion. This was seen by the Principal as his having given me an opportunity to express my feelings – and he told me this. Quietly I still harboured distress that I had not been permitted to watch such a momentous, historic event.

Later that year I saw an advertisement for a position in another school. I decided to apply for this position as I felt it would be best for everyone, despite it being some further 30 minutes drive from my home. I won the position. People at the school were friendly and supportive. The Principal gave me an outline of my responsibilities and I was feeling very positive when I commenced on Day 1 the next year.

Before the end of the first day I realised something had changed significantly. My full-time STIE role had been added to, making it a totally unachievable full time role plus a 50% teaching role. Whether by design or disorganisation I was given little information and much of it was inaccurate. Significant details regarding the students with whom I was to work was withheld from me. The processes for finding required information were not made clear. I was directed to seek the help of staff, from whom I experienced no help.

Certainly the attitude of the Principal toward me was quite different. I found that he would come to me on a daily basis, usually to report or ask about something I had done wrong. (Example: mobile phones were banned by school rules according to the student diary. Following this rule I had confiscated a phone being used in class and handed it in to the office – the procedure I was told to follow. I had observed phones used in the playground were overlooked by staff, so I too overlooked this. Apparently the student whose phone I had confiscated had been responding to a personal issue and I should have allowed her to use the phone during class. I was reprimanded.)

I was told of various policies for communication, which included my not contacting parents, government or NGOs such as Dept of Families or Autism Qld. I was to refer everything through either the VET coordinator (as Snr School Coordinator) or the nun at the school. When I became aware that the VET coordinator was not a registered teacher and privately questioned why I was required to consult her for advice on pedagogy, curriculum and also students, I was told I was 'on a one way ticket out of here – suffering from &%'&itis' (a phantom disease based on the Principal's name). I also became aware that when the nun passed on my information, it was in a modified version.

Quite soon other staff could see what was happening and told me I was obviously a member of "the black group": those who are victimised until they leave. I was assured there had been many precedents.

It was suggested to me by a BCE Consultant who had arranged to meet me for a coffee off-site - because she feared being seen talking to me, that the Principals would have conferred, and my name was probably blackened between appointment and commencement of duties. This was also given as the possible reason why a job that was apparently 'ongoing' initially had become a 12 month contract following my appointment – taking into account the previous Principal having told me he would not give me permanency. Perhaps he intended to ensure I never got it.....

The Consultant had also asked me to try to change some assessment strategies for the Queensland Certificate of Education that BCE knew were quite dishonest. I subsequently experienced being ordered to sign off as satisfactory all students – even those who I did not feel had obtained appropriate literacy standards from my class because "All students leave here with a QCE and we are proud of that". Of course the Consultant did not mention having had this meeting with me when she listed the support she had given me.

Over coming days it became clear what was to be my fate. I was called on a daily basis for a meeting with the Principal. I was told to seek assistance from the VET coordinator (who I had been told was the Senior School Coordinator) because I was clearly having trouble relating to and teaching the students. It was regularly suggested to me that I was not suitable for the job, despite my qualifications. I noted that a number of girls would frequently absent themselves from my classes. Upon investigation, I usually found they had been either with the Vet coordinator or the Principal. I was told by witnesses to this that these meetings usually involved the Principal and/or Vet Coordinator seeking incriminating information from the girls about me. On one occasion a witness to this came to me and advised me to call in the union because she had witnessed the incident being reported (inaccurately) by the girls and the Principal's obvious support and response to it. It was apparent to this person that the Principal was creating a 'file' on me.

I spoke to the Union and started to forward them information. On an occasion I also spoke to the Area Supervisor, who advised me to 'fly below the radar because things will change eventually'. She appeared to be quite well aware of the problems at the school, and was privately supportive. I later found this did not extend to a public arena or one involving BCE. I started to ask the Union Rep at the school to accompany me every time I was called to a meeting with the Principal. This caused him extreme anger, with him having approached me privately in my room one day and when I had assertively said I would 'organise for David to come to the meeting with me', he yelled, slammed the door and left.

Following this, I found that when I did go to meetings with the Union Organiser present, there were early attempts to suggest serious concerns – one was a sexual harassment allegation for having referred to a staff member as 'Jugalugs'. A Code of Conduct was handed to me, which I noted was intercepted by David – the Union rep and never given to me. I had referred to the VET coordinator as 'bugalugs' in a conversation, when her name didn't come to me immediately. This was used merely as a term of reference. I was also accused of bullying staff. I was somewhat horrified and insulted by the suggestion that I would indulge in activities I find ethically and morally appalling.

Upon reference of this to the Union, the initial comment was "Oh no. Not him again." It was apparent to me that this was a previously reported strategy. Staff confirmed this. Since my leaving, I have heard of others who have been accused of the behaviours happening to them – notably bullying. The Union later confirmed that they had many previous complaints, but legislation meant they were unable to do much. They also advised of a pattern of behaviours.

I could feel myself deteriorating in terms of mental health. I found no support was forthcoming from BCE or the Union, so on recommendation of a member of staff I consulted a nearby solicitor. I knew my days were 'numbered'. The solicitor contacted the Principal, requesting that he not approach me privately. Upon receipt of this advice, the Principal stormed into my room early the next morning and demanded an immediate meeting with me in his office. I advised him that I thought he had been given advice to request these meetings via other channels (email, telephone etc) but once I had organised with David, this could be arranged. Meanwhile I asked me to email me an outline of the context for which he desired the meeting. He refused to do so.

I taught for the next few hours, having some memorable and positive experiences with the students. In the early afternoon I phoned the solicitor for advice on my next move because David was not

actually at school that day. The advice I was given was to pick up my bag (nothing else) and leave, ringing her when I was off-site. She would contact the school. This is what I did.

On arrival home I checked my emails. There was an email from a staff member advising me that one of the boys, who had significant mental health issues along with an Autism diagnosis had told her he was going to kill approximately 10 other students (who regularly bullied him). He had outlined to her how he intended to do this. She asked my advice. I emailed back that I would follow it up, which I did – forwarding her advice to the Principal, with a CC to the Area Supervisor due to nature of the concerns.

I received a response that it would be followed up and I was obligated to maintain confidentiality. As I was on leave, I was to take no further action. Based on my experiences at this school, I felt that this would join a growing number of concerns I felt existed that were being swept under the carpet. Within a week I found I was unable to sleep at night, worried about possible consequences. I decided to mention it to my GP and on his advice notified Dept of Family Services (who I had also been told in writing by the Principal that I was not to have contact with). Some of the students on the list were children within their care. I am aware that they pursued the issue because they made some contact with me. Once again there were mutterings about loopholes in the legislation.

By this time I was full of self-doubt, wondering what was 'wrong' with me. As time passed and networks of peers, professionals and others have provided me with support, I unfortunately realise that what I experienced is all too common. There is nothing 'wrong' with me.

Like me, desperate and ill staff thrash around trying to get help, only to find that they start to feel like a toxic island. The Unions, who we thought we paid dues to in order to help us at these times do not seem to be able to assist – frequent mutterings about 'legislation with holes in it'. Other staff are frightened to support publicly, for fear of repercussion and/or denial of professional advancement or favour. More senior employees, seemingly bolstered by the previous results of their strategies continue to apply this to anyone from whom they may be professionally questioned, challenged or held to account. Younger teachers, who were offered employment preference at both the Catholic schools in which I taught are openly preferred by the Principals, both of whom were heard to say "they can be moulded". I take this to mean, they will either comply without question or, as the statistics show – they will leave.

It would be my suggestion that in some cases the bullying I have experienced has been as a result of either professional jealousy, or the fear of exposure of inadequacies/discrepancies.

I am an older teacher. I left. I continue to work in a minor capacity in the areas of my expertise and interest both in a private capacity and in a tertiary environment, where I have been lucky to find support and professional respect.

I have suffered significant health issues, some of which I would allege may have been exacerbated by my experiences.

I have suffered significant financial loss as a result of not having been able to pursue my chosen career – as a direct result of my experiences.

This has had an enormous effect on me, my family and friends, who have supported me throughout. Despite this support, I have felt there were times where they have also wondered about the recurrent nature of these experiences. I have had to reassure myself, my family and my friends that whilst there is a pattern – this did not happen in NSW, in the tertiary environment in which I now work, nor with all Principals. This nagging ‘self-doubt’ and the perception of ‘doubt’ by others continues although is somewhat exonerated when tragedies in education become public. At these times my distress is obvious, but there is a sense of ‘another one’. I find the local nature of some of these events truly horrific.

The experiences mentioned here – the more significant amongst many, have left me quite ‘damaged’. Recently attending a retirement function at one of the schools involved (where the Principal was not present), I left feeling a high level of trauma despite the location being the only factor that should have contributed to by distress. This took some days to overcome (to some extent) and I suspect that any incident that brings the events I have experienced to mind will probably result in the same level of distress. Therefore, I will avoid such events.