

Article

The Dark Side of School Culture

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Abstract: The extant literature evidences the link between incivility and workplace culture. Both have a symbiotic relationship whereby a change in one influences the other. When workplace cultures develop dysfunctional values and beliefs, negative traditions, and caustic ways of interacting, they have become “toxic cultures.” This study examined Irish post-primary school teachers’ experiences of incivility and toxic culture in the workplace through in-depth interviews with forty-two participants. Results show that toxic work culture had a negative impact on both the personal and professional lives of the participants. We conclude that antecedents in toxic school culture are linked to epistemological assumptions, group dynamics, and deficiencies in leadership, and we suggest that they act as causes and/or facilitators of workplace bullying.

Keywords: workplace culture; incivility; toxic culture; post-primary schools



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1. Introduction

The extant literature evidences the link between incivility and workplace culture [1,2] and when workplace cultures develop dysfunctional values and beliefs, negative traditions, and caustic ways of interacting, they have become “toxic cultures” [3]. While there are variances in the definition of workplace bullying, the generally accepted definition used in Ireland for public service employees is provided in national policy. It states that bullying is “repeated inappropriate behaviour, direct or indirect, whether verbal, physical or otherwise, conducted by one or more persons against another or others, at the place of work and/or in the course of employment, which could reasonably be regarded as undermining the individual’s right to dignity at work” [4] (p. 5). There is consensus in the literature that bullying can have a devastating effect on the physical and psychological wellbeing of the target, yet despite this recognition there remains in many countries (Ireland included), no dedicated legislation addressing the issue of workplace bullying and, as a result, reliance is generally placed on ‘Codes of Practice’ [5]. In addition, these codes of practice have been described as ineffective in protecting people from bullying at work [6]. Certainly teachers’ attempts to seek redress for workplace bullying have proven to lack efficacy [7]. Research into the causes of this is still in relative infancy however, initial insights suggest that power and organisational culture are key components for organisational inaction in terms of addressing workplace bullying [8–12]. The authors advocate that when researchers of workplace bullying do not take cognizance of cultural antecedents, they are missing a vital component when seeking to understand why bullying and incivility occur and how/why, they continue to flourish. Therefore, the authors embarked upon this study, not only to understand the lived experience of participants but also to delve deeper into the types of workplace culture that participants were working in, so as to provide insight into the part that school culture might play (if any) in the dynamic.

1.1. Workplace Bullying as Misuse of Power

Appropriation, use, and misuse of power feature widely in the extant literature on workplace bullying [7,10,13,14]. A critical theoretic perspective would position power at the centre, given that according to Foucault, for example, power is “everywhere, not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere, one is never outside it” [15] (p. 141). This adds deeper complexity when looking at workplace bullying in the context of schools as it means all actors to some degree are utilising power whether less or more effectively [7] with implications for how we understand the behaviours and actions of both bullies and their targets. Lutgen-Sandvik has advocated that “power is better framed as polymorphous and shifting in which all actors have access to certain rules and resources of power, albeit at greater or lesser degrees” [16] (p. 428). This resonates with “the micro physics of power” that Foucault [17] (p. 26) suggests which, according to Fahie and Devine from their study of workplace bullying among teachers, is “embedded in organizational cultures and in the ways of thinking, doing, and being within that organization” [13] (p. 239). It is power exercised at the deepest level of the body; influencing and shaping perception, action and being.” They argue that power is something that one exercises, and that significantly, emanates or derives from relations with others [18]. In the context of workplace bullying amongst teachers and school workplace culture, these insights are particularly salient. Traditionally, the prevalence of workplace bullying is higher in education than in other employment sectors [19]. It is worthy of note that not all mistreatment will be framed under the nomenclature of bullying, whereas the ‘micro physics of power’ [17] or what Stephen Ball calls the ‘micro politics’ of the staffroom [20] may play themselves out in more subtle and uncivil ways with damaging consequences nonetheless.

1.2. Incivility

Workplace incivility is a growing challenge for organisations [21]. Incivility is defined as being characterised by elements of low intensity and ambiguous intent to harm [22]. It often seeps into the workplace climate insidiously, at first quite subtly but when left unchecked it becomes deeply rooted in the complex dynamic of school culture, thus tolerance of incivility quickly becomes embedded in daily interactions, thereby facilitating negative, toxic and/or bullying behaviour to flourish. These toxic cultures are “places where negativity dominates conversations, interactions, and planning; where the only stories recounted are of failure” [3]—usually someone else’s failure. When left to flourish these toxic cultures can become oppositional and can be characterised by acerbic tones [23]. These toxic and acerbic tones are often hidden in the veneer of humour. Humour thus becomes a vehicle to disguise negative interpersonal communicative intent that can be barbed, competitive, or confrontational [24]. Once incivility becomes embedded within an organisation, it quickly becomes normalised and difficult to challenge. Drawing on Foucault, the process of normalisation is understood in this context to mean a system through which individuals become distributed around a norm, which both organises and controls them [25]. Reio and Reio have argued that in an educational climate of high stakes testing and increasing accountability, stress can prevail among teachers and principals creating the ideal conditions for uncivil behaviour to emerge [26]. Their research has also found that supervisor and coworker incivility can adversely affect teacher commitment, engagement, performance, and job satisfaction, and increase teacher burnout and intention to leave [26]. Therefore, the impact of uncivil climate is problematic for teacher wellbeing both personally and professionally.

1.3. Organisational Climate

Organisational culture and climate stems from both espoused and enacted values, and practices that are part of the daily work life, and school workplace culture is no different in this regard. Without doubt, school culture is, as Stoll [27] advocates, one of the most complex fields in education. In line with Van Maanen and Barley [28], we advocate that

school workplaces are occupational communities with their own unique work culture as this research will demonstrate. Our focus is on the organisational culture of the school *as a workplace*, with particular emphasis on incivility and toxic school workplace culture, which we believe to be a neglected area of study. Elsewhere, we have identified that school staffrooms are “curious places as they are typically not characterised by the discourses of “workplace”, yet this does not inure them from being the sites of significant workplace bullying,” [7] (p. 83) and we argue that the unique nature of the school as a workplace may be a factor.

1.4. School Culture

Academics have grappled substantively with school culture in the 1980s and 1990s [29–37]. However, the focus on school culture in the literature appears to abate in the early 2000s. School culture literature of the time appears to focus predominantly on change, school improvement and the challenges associated with such changes, with exception of Stephen Ball [20] whose seminal work explored the school as an organisation through a micro political lens. Put simply, organisational culture can be described as “the way we do things around here” (the what), with organisational climate denoting the perceptions of how we do things around here (how it feels), and it is far more complex as the literature demonstrates. Indeed, Geerts described culture as webs of significance [38] and these webs of significance are inherently complex and interconnected, not always easily visible but deeply influential nonetheless.

The truly embedded nature of school culture is well documented in the literature and the failure of many policy reforms in recent decades has been attributed to the stubborn nature of school culture, characterised by resistance to threats to its norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals [3]. Indeed, Hinde [23] identifies failure to recognise the complexity of school culture as a significant factor in resistance to reforms. Furthermore, school culture is profoundly shaped by individual institutional history. Schools are inherently hierarchical in nature. As such, schools as workplace environments may become the ideal setting for bullying and incivility to arise due to the different levels of organisation and inherent power dynamics that often facilitate and sustain toxic behaviours. Unfortunately, these hierarchical structures are supported by legislation, regulations and processes and are therefore difficult to challenge or call out. These hierarchies further manifest themselves in unique dynamics surrounding academic/subject disciplines that are rooted deeply in grander epistemological debates about what counts as valid knowledge. Becher [39] describes academic disciplines (in this case school subjects) as academic tribes with their own cultures and each with their own way of perceiving the world.

1.5. Subject Hierarchy

Subject hierarchy is at the core of staffroom hierarchy and is oftentimes the basis for organisational toxicity. It is embedded in the school curricula and is driven by underlying assumptions that “some school subjects are more valuable than others” [40] (p. 617). Indeed, Bleazby [40] argues that this traditional hierarchy is embedded within a dubious epistemological framework that equates knowledge with certainty and that elite curriculum content is more theoretical, while low status content is associated with practicality. High status subjects tend to be primarily concerned with theoretical knowledge [41], they tend to enjoy this status at the expense of the other disciplines [42] and this distinction can sometimes provoke uncivil interpersonal relations.

To challenge toxic interactions is not easy for teachers. Not challenging these toxic interactions does not necessarily mean compliance or that teachers are inured to the toxic culture. Rather, those who witness them may be making a rational and self-protective choice. Unfortunately, not challenging toxic interactions is, more often than not, interpreted as compliance and acceptance, and thus conversely facilitates toxicity in the organisation.

Drawing on the work of Giddens, we interpret this kind of, albeit limited choice as a form of agency, because in doing nothing, or even when simply conforming, these decisions to self-protect or to engage are still based on choices [43]. Conversely, doing nothing does

not necessarily result in nothing happening, because in not challenging toxic work culture, teachers are unwittingly reinforcing the normalising power of workplace toxicity. It is significantly challenging, even personally threatening, to break the 'norm', but the irony is that even the casualties of toxic behaviours may also unwittingly be contributing to its continuance; such is its malign influence.

The original aim of the study was to explore the lived experience of workplace bullying among post-primary teachers. However, as the study progressed it became evident that the issues that emerged were not confined to bullying or to interpersonal conflict per se, but were rooted in the territory of incivility and toxic culture. This then became the focus of our analysis and of this paper. Therefore, the aim of exploring the lived experience of post-primary teachers of workplace bullying, broadened. The aim then became to explore teachers' lived experience of workplace bullying and incivility. In seeking to address this broadened aim, sub research questions emerged:

1. What is the lived experience of incivility?
2. What types of bullying or incivility are manifest?
3. How do teachers perceive the reasons for and influence of these behaviours?
4. What part does staffroom culture play in these experiences?

This paper then illuminates our understanding of school workplace culture by exploring subcultures that form around subject disciplines, and an understanding of the artefacts and manifestations of culture such as dark humour, language, purposeful isolation, cliques, and toxic leadership.

2. Materials and Methods

A phenomenological research approach was chosen for this research and comprised in-depth interviews with forty-two participants. This phenomenological approach was adopted because the researchers sought to unravel how people understand and comprehend experiences of workplace bullying and toxicity in their workplaces. Phenomenological researchers seek to describe the essence of a phenomenon from the perspective of those who have experienced it and to understand the meaning participants ascribe to the phenomenon [44]. The purpose is also to contribute to understanding in the particular context [44] in this case school workplaces. Van Manen [45] puts it succinctly when he writes that phenomenology is the systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures of lived experience. This method is by its essence, sensitive to the deeply subjective nature of the phenomenon under investigation. The authors' research ethics committee granted approval for the study.

2.1. Data Collection

Interviews were chosen as the data collection method because they facilitate the researcher to explore in more depth how participants understood their experiences of workplace bullying and workplace culture. The researchers used a semi-structured interview approach. An interview guide was designed based on the researchers' review of the literature pertaining to workplace bullying and their knowledge of school environments. The interview had five overarching questions (with probing sub-questions). During interview, participants were asked to describe (a) their perceptions of the interpersonal nature of their workplace, (b) their experiences of bullying, (c) the personal and professional impact of their experiences, (d) coping strategies, and (e) experiences of help seeking if relevant.

In order to identify potential participants, a self-selecting sampling strategy was employed. The first author who conducted the interviews designed a poster identifying the research theme and invited teachers who had experienced workplace bullying to make contact with her. The poster included a phone number and email address for contact. Given the sensitivities of contacting schools on the topic of workplace bullying and asking for participation, the researchers' adopted a gentle sampling approach. The first author disseminated the posters to schools via post with a letter to the school principal asking for permission for their staff to participate. If they were agreeable to the invitation, the

letter asked that they display the poster on staff notice boards. Again, given the relative sensitivities, no follow up was made, making it impossible to know how many were displayed. The sample is not a representative one. All schools sampled were post-primary schools. There are approximately 730 post-primary schools in the Republic of Ireland (ROI). Forty post-primary schools in each of the three provinces in the ROI (Munster, Leinster, and Connaught) were randomly selected from the list of post-primary schools. Of the 120 schools, forty-five teachers (from 36 schools in the three regions) then self-selected to be interviewed. Due to this sampling process, it is not possible to calculate a response rate, as the researchers were not aware of (a) how many posters were eventually displayed on notice boards and (b) the staff numbers in the schools. As a result, it is not intended to generalise from this research, but rather to seek to illuminate the insights of participants with regard to culture and workplace incivility (see Table 1 for interview schedule).

Table 1. Interview schedule.

Workplace Bullying Interview Guide	
Introduction	Thank you for agreeing to participate in interview, could we begin with you telling me why you chose to participate in this study?
1. Interpersonal Interactions/culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. In general, how do you perceive that your staff relates to each other? b. What motivates staff interactions? c. What is the effect of these interactions? d. Is there anything in the structure of teachers' working environment that influences staff interactions? e. Could you give me an example?
2. Workplace Bullying.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. How do you understand workplace bullying? b. Do you believe it occurs in your school? c. In the course of your work, have you been subjected to workplace bullying behaviours? d. Why do you think this occurs? (If answered yes to above) e. Is there anything in the structure of teachers' working environment that influences staff interactions? f. How have you (and others) responded? (If answered yes to above)
3. Impact of Bullying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. What do you think is the effect of this: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) professionally? (b) personally? (If answered yes to above) b. Could you give me an example?
4. Coping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. How do you cope with this? b. Are there strategies that have helped you?
5. Help Seeking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Did you inform school leadership/management? b. Did you get support? If yes from whom?
6. Solution Focused	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. What suggestions/recommendations would you make in order to address any issues with regard to workplace bullying/staff culture that we may have discussed during this interview?
Conclusion	Thank you for talking the time to speak with me today. Is there anything I have missed that you would like to add here before we conclude?

Forty-five teachers made return contact directly with the researcher via phone or email and they were sent an information sheet detailing the research scope and design and the research requirements, which was to participate in interview. The first author then left it to the teachers to follow-up contact her if they wished to continue with the process after considering the information sheet. She did not initiate contact with them to avoid placing undue pressure to participate and to safeguard their confidentiality. Forty-two teachers followed up by contacting the researcher, seeking to participate in the research and they were interviewed (see Table 2 for participant information). Given the sensitive

nature of the topic and the courage it can take for a recipient of incivility to self-select to be interviewed, it was decided to interview all participants who made contact with the researchers. As a result, data saturation was met and exceeded. No compensation was given for participation in the study.

Table 2. Participants.

Interview No. School Number: No.	Gender	Age	School Type	Years Teaching
1 (School Number: 1)	Male	48	Urban	26
2 (School Number: 2)	Male	34	Urban	12
3 (School Number: 2)	Female	41	Urban	19
4 (School Number: 3)	Female	42	Urban	21
5 (School Number: 4)	Female	24	Rural	2
6 (School Number: 5)	Female	30	Urban	9
7 (School Number: 6)	Female	40	Rural	18
8 (School Number: 7)	Male	33	Suburban	12
9 (School Number: 8)	Female	27	Rural	3
10 (School Number: 9)	Male	55	Rural	17
11 (School Number: 10)	Female	43	Suburban	22
12. (School Number: 11)	Male	59	Rural	29
13 (School Number: 12)	Male	30	Urban	7
14 (School Number: 13)	Male	35	Rural	10
15 (School Number: 14)	Female	50	Rural	38
16 (School Number: 15)	Female	25	Rural	3
17 (School Number: 16)	Female	41	Urban	20
18 (School Number: 17)	Male	45	Rural	24
19 (School Number: 18)	Male	29	Rural	6
20 (School Number: 10)	Male	45	Suburban	23
21 (School Number: 19)	Male	47	Urban	25
22 (School Number: 20)	Female	38	Rural	17
23 (School Number: 21)	Male	28	Rural	6
24 (School Number: 22)	Female	48	Rural	26
25 (School Number: 23)	Female	25	Urban	2
26 (School Number: 15)	Female	32	Rural	10
27 (School Number: 24)	Male	56	Urban	34
28 (School Number: 25)	Female	44	Rural	15
29 (School Number: 26)	Female	29	Rural	4
30 (School Number: 15)	Female	23	Rural	1
31 (School Number: 27)	Male	49	Urban	27
32 (School Number: 18)	Female	60	Rural	39
33 (School Number: 28)	Female	41	Urban	19
34 (School Number: 29)	Female	27	Urban	4
35 (School Number: 30)	Male	28	Rural	6
36 (School Number: 31)	Female	45	Rural	23
37 (School Number: 31)	Female	31	Rural	9
38 (School Number: 32)	Female	50	Urban	18
39 (School Number: 33)	Male	56	Urban	34
40 (School Number: 34)	Female	35	Rural	13
41 (School Number: 35)	Male	29	Rural	7
42 (School Number: 36)	Male	52	Rural	31

Legend: Forty-two participants took part in the study. All were post-primary teachers. The sample consisted of 24 females and 18 males, with an age range of 24–60 years.

Interviews occurred in person, lasted on average one hour and fifteen minutes and were recorded. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and transcripts were returned to individual participants for participant validation prior to data analysis. Interviews were open and conversational in nature [46].

2.2. Data Analysis

Data analysis was underpinned by the work of Ricoeur, who advocated hermeneutical activity as seeking to uncover the meaning of existence, which is achieved through interpretation of phenomena and that these exist as embedded in the world of culture [47,48]. In particular, Ricoeur identified that merely describing or explaining text confines one to a structuralist approach, and that it is in transcending the limitations of description to examine also the symbolic world that enables one to more fully understand one's being as culturally embedded. The data analysis followed the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach taken by Smith, Flowers and Larkin [49] as a systematic and flexible data analysis procedure. Step 1 involved reading the transcripts multiple times to immerse oneself in the data. This is advocated to ensure that the participant is the focus of the analysis and to facilitate the researcher to enter the participant's world [49]. Patterns may be evident in the participants' life stories [49]. This reading is accompanied by detailed annotation and notetaking. Step two involved transforming the annotations and notes into emergent themes. At this stage, the researcher sought to formulate a concise phrase at a slightly higher level of abstraction for each pattern as recommended by Pietkiewicz and Smith [50]. Stage three involved seeking relationships and clustering of the emergent themes, grouping them together and providing each cluster with a descriptive label.

Charmaz [51] has pointed to the dynamic nature of data generation and analysis in her work on constructivist grounded theory. She explains: "the viewer creates the data and ensuing analysis through interaction with the viewed" [51] (p. 273). In so doing, she directs one's attention to understanding that the qualitative researcher is not seeking to represent an objective reality [51]. Williamson [52] further illuminates this insight when she writes that this means that, although there is every effort made to present the viewpoint of participants, there is acceptance that "we shape the data collection and redirect our analysis as new issues emerge" [51] (p. 271). Data triangulation is often employed as a process through which potential bias can be mitigated. Data triangulation, (also described as participant or source triangulation) is where the researcher examines data from different respondents but which was collected using the same method as is the case in this study. Turner [53] acknowledges that, as qualitative researchers, if we work on the premise that each participant has a unique and valid worldview, the researcher then is often seeking to try to find patterns or contradictions beyond the individual experience. Triangulation was present at all stages of the analytical procedure. At stage one, each transcript was read and annotated. Then, the next transcript was read and annotations were mapped back onto the previous annotations/analysis to cross check for patterns and contradictions. At stage two, all annotations and patterns were noted and placed under the emergent themes. Stage three required a formalising of the themes which were influenced by the patterns of data that emerged. This final list then was categorised into superordinate groups. The superordinate themes were Subject Hierarchy and Sub Cultures; Dark Humour and Lack of Authenticity; Purposeful Isolation; Cliques and Toxic Leadership.

3. Results

All participants disclosed experiences of workplace incivility/bullying. This was to be expected given the purposeful nature of the sampling of the invitation to participate. All participants also identified what could be described as an unhealthy workplace culture. The impact of working in a culture that was unsupportive appeared to reach beyond the work life for people and had the potential to take over colleagues' lives, "*It was really hurtful to see people beaten down to the point where their whole lives were centred around the problems they were having in school*" (Interviewee 10). The reasons behind problematic behaviours in the school as a workplace were multifaceted and complex as the data evidenced. Explanations provided by participants for incivility in their workplaces, ranged from subject subculture and hierarchy, to interpersonal dynamics, groups and cliques, and toxic leadership.

3.1. Subject Hierarchy and Sub Cultures

Across the data set, the problematic nature of subject subculture was reiterated. *“The non-academic subjects such as Art, Metalwork, Woodwork, Home Economics, those teachers are like the second-class citizens and those subjects are fitted in between the important academic subjects”* (Interviewee 6). The subject specialism of the teacher was perceived as influencing their standing and their agency in the staff room. *“Art is seen as a doss subject and you send the non-academic students in there, you really have to fight to be included and to have a voice in the staffroom”* (Interviewee 3). There appeared to be an adversarial or combative culture among the subjects. *“It is where you can really see the bullying—between academic and non-academic teachers”* (Interviewee 19). Some participants used the language of ‘attack’ when speaking of the dynamics between subject specialism. *“We have cliques of subjects, art versus science, versus technical subjects. One particular area seems to resent and attack another”* (Interviewee 17).

I might come into the staff room and I might say ‘X did very badly in an exam’ or something and straight away this attack would start. ‘Oh they cannot do your subject. You are there and straight away, you feel ‘Oh my goodness it is me’, because that is the point they are making. It is about ‘I will try to put you down.’ Whether it is intended or not because I am not inside that person’s head, but the teacher feels inadequate, and for teachers already feeling under stress in classrooms to make them feel inadequate is a major bullying problem in my book. (Interviewee 9)

This subculture was palpable throughout many artefacts of culture such as language, meetings, and staff interactions: *“In the staff meeting there is a vibe sent out that when someone from a practical subject speaks they are less intelligent than an academic subject teacher is, so anything they say is not worth the effort”* (Interviewee 21). It was implicitly understood by the staff that certain subjects carried more weight and privilege and were in some ways protected, while others were clearly not. This also appeared to influence relationships with school principals and some interviewees perceived it as a cause for bullying and incivility. *“I teach Religion and Social Personal and Health Education, my subjects do not even feature on the ladder and I am treated like that. Because I am on contract as well, I was told not to speak at staff meetings because I am part time”* (Interviewee 30).

3.2. Dark Humour and Lack of Authenticity

The role of humour emerged as a common theme. Initially a vehicle for relating to one another, participants also experienced humour as hurtful and divisive, even hostile. It was also viewed as a way of creating and normalising gender divisions. Several interviewees referred to a gender divide amongst teachers with each gender clustering together. One explained: *“males sit on one side of the room and females sit on the other and staff get upset if this unwritten rule gets broken”* (Interviewee 11). Staff meetings appeared to be the forum for displaying wit at the expense of others. *“Staff meetings are where the sarcasm, ridicule and witty comments at our expense are made”* (Interviewee 1). *“Staff meetings were the place for all smart comments, making fun of people and really undermining them”* (Interviewee 29).

“There are times when the joke can turn and then it is no longer a joke. People are getting hurt by it. Initially you can laugh at it but sometimes you feel self-conscious that you have to explain yourself. It is said in a joking way but there is an undercurrent there and sometimes I am afraid do they actually think that.” (Interviewee 6)

Participants also reported uncertainty regarding the authenticity/sincerity of these interactions and were therefore more likely to assign hostile meaning to them:

Some people at work have the dry eyes that don’t laugh the lips that smile but the eyes that don’t. It means that they really are not with you, they smile there is a certain condescension; there is a level of insincerity, a lot of that goes on. There is no depth of sincerity in the relating in the staff room. (Interviewee 7)

3.3. Purposeful Isolation

The purposeful social isolation of colleagues also emerged as a key theme in this study. Interestingly, participants highlighted purposeful isolation as a power tactic adopted by teachers in the classroom to control their students. Participants reported how this ‘divide and conquer’ control tactic seeped into the staffroom and was also used as a form of social exclusion with peers *“We know isolation is a form of control we do it in our teaching. It is the way of controlling your class so subconsciously because we know about the power of isolation we use it in the staff room”* (Interviewee 1).

Subconsciously because you know about the power of isolation. We can be very authoritarian, disciplinarians and forget to let it go in the staff room. We more than most people have power within our profession. We tend to control and to dominate situations. There is that tendency to isolate people in teaching and it can be done very subtly, you can make someone a laughing stock. (Interviewee 7)

3.4. Cliques

Cliques emerged as quite a powerful dynamic in workplace interactions for teachers. Bullying was frequently perceived as linked to these dominant staff groupings or ‘cliques’ that were understood to be *“connected to the hierarchy of management”* (Interviewee 15).

Well, you have the inner circle and the outer circle. The inner circle who has the ear of the principal and are accommodated in every single way, got privileges on the timetable and that kind of thing and then you have the outer circle who are flung from Billy to Jack without warning and enjoy no privilege. Some people feel totally intimidated if they walk into the staff room and this particular group are there. It sounds petty and it sounds like something I would hear about from the children but they are. They do actually feel intimidated. (Interviewee 9)

They do not speak in public and I think that is the difference. Any meeting we have, you know it is coming from them, as I would be kind of close to someone who is on the periphery of the group. You can hear the conversations that they have among themselves and then when it comes out of the principal’s mouth you know where it came from. If you were at a staff meeting they would never say anything, just agree with the principal. (Interviewee 10)

Cliques were perceived as powerful entities and appeared to be able to garner resource power and leadership support.

You have three or four obvious informers that could be set up. I could say something in the staff room just to set them up, knowing very well that they would run down the stairs and tell the principal and the principal would be back up the stairs in five minutes. (Interviewee 8)

If you were foolish enough to bring it up (an issue) at staff meetings you would be totally humiliated. The way they all silently support each other there is nothing you can do really. When you see them all at staff meetings saying nothing that is just the way it is. I used to speak up but you know you can be easily silenced so I have stopped. (Interviewee 40)

3.5. Toxic Leadership

While certain cliques were perceived as being ‘allowed’ to engage in bullying by school leaders, school leaders themselves were perceived as being part of the problem. Participants spoke of examples of poor or partisan leadership with leaders who engaged in bullying behaviour as a form of management control. They reported instances of strategic bullying including punishing those who question or disagree with harsher teaching timetables and heavier workload. This was particularly prevalent when employees were in vulnerable positions such as temporary contracts.

He has his clique around him. He had eccentric educational views and some people affirmed him and others did not. Those who did not agree were treated harshly. You know the cliché the only way you can get at teachers in through the timetable? Have you heard that? Those who did not affirm him were got at through the timetable. It was blatant, as obvious to all of us. (Interviewee 8)

To disagree would be to risk punishment in terms loss of contract: *“The principal is powerful especially if you are on a temporary contract and ours has not reemployed a teacher who disagreed with him”* (Interviewee 19). Undermining behaviours from leaders were also described: *“During my classes the deputy principal comes into the room and berates the students for not having the room clean. She looks at me meaningfully then it is as if she is implying that my discipline is lacking”* (Interviewee 26). *“I have been totally undermined and publicly degraded by the principal about my work and my discipline and it’s been done in the staff meetings”* (Interviewee 18).

To disagree would be to risk public humiliation: *“The principal is in the school a long time and has a problem with new staff who ask too many questions. After being publicly humiliated once or twice at the staff meetings I quickly learned not to question the status quo”* (Interviewee 13).

Perceptions of becoming quickly encultured and adopting similar behavioural patterns to fit in were also evident in the data, for example: *“There is a certain element of trying to take on power in teaching in any way that you can. A new young teacher I know of, who is only there a few months, has made statements to an older woman on the staff, having picked them up from the others, within a few months she had clued in to what the others were doing to this woman and now does the same”* (Interviewee 22).

3.6. Coping

Avoidance and communicative self-censorship was a common response. *“Because that is the only way . . . totally avoiding contact, saying nothing, confiding nothing not even discuss anything because you will end up the brunt. You will suffer at some stage”* (Interviewee 9). *“As we get older in the job, we learn distance. I find it difficult to do but it is a coping strategy and I am getting better at it”* (Interviewee 30).

I focus on my family and on myself now; I distance myself from the bullies and from school really. I just go in now, do my job and go home. I have to distance myself. It is the only way that I can personally cope with it, and there are days when things will just run off me. (Interviewee 21)

I totally avoid them, I have no contact whatsoever. I don’t ever enter into conversation with the principal that will end up in my suffering more at a later stage. I avoid any types of engagement that could cause hassle or confrontation not so as to protect myself. (Interviewee 11)

Not reacting was also a common theme: *“I get so surprised when an attack comes or something is said. I come home really upset—in tears. After each one I think ‘that is it’ and I move on from it. I think it is over but there is a next time”* (Interviewee 22). The responses of others were to seek employment elsewhere, for example, *“It spurred me to continue my efforts to get out”* (Interviewee 35); *“I have decided to look for a new school”* (Interviewee 20). One interviewee explained that they cope by retaliating: *“I retaliate as soon as it starts I shout back I get it out there and then. My colleague told me that this is not good because I am behaving a bit like a bully but if it means that I am not taking it home then it is worth it”* (Interviewee 25).

Another interviewee identified that some people retaliate but saw it as problematic:

I don’t react publicly, but others do. They retaliate and show many traits of bullying behaviours because there is no other forum to deal with it. They get their aggression out that way. When they retaliate that way they do not help their predicament, it just allows the bully to say how unprofessional they are. (Interviewee 10)

3.7. Personal and Professional Development as a Response

Participants were unanimous that seeking support from school leaders was ineffective and that naming the poor behaviours was perceived to only to exacerbate their situations. There was a palpable sense of lack of agency in being able to stop the poor workplace behaviour that was having an adverse impact upon them. However, there was a stronger sense of personal (private) agency. Several had embarked upon professional studies, such as postgraduate studies and were investing in their own sense of self. They articulated that engaging in personal and professional development had aided them in regaining self-esteem. One interviewee explained that as a result of personal development when she is having a bad day that only she is aware of it *“Now when I have my inadequate days they don’t know what is inside of my mind, only I know that,”* so that the perception of others no longer dictates how she feels.

3.8. Impact

Participants indicated that they experienced several negative effects on their personal wellbeing and discussed different ways in which they dealt with these effects. Thirty-three of the interviewees identified experiencing symptoms that they linked to stress, and these ranged from headaches and migraine, stomach upset, disturbed sleep, loss of appetite, depression, raised blood pressure, excess sweating, and shaking.

The negative impact on health and wellbeing was perceived to be significant: *“I would feel sick as soon as I saw the school. I would wake at night and my head would be racing and my heart pounding I guess that is stress isn’t it?”* (Interviewee 30). Talking about it with family/partner was a most common response; however, this was noted to be difficult for the family: *“it’s hard for them when it is all I can focus on”* (Interviewee 20). Less healthy responses included alcohol use: *“In the times that I went home really raw I was drinking, I was doing it a lot and my family don’t need that”* (Interviewee 10). *“I just hated going into work and then as I went home every day I would feel really vulnerable and start drinking . . . I just needed to unwind so I would drink at night”* (Interviewee 26). The link between professional and personal impact was viewed as ‘expected’: *“It is to be expected that when you are undermined professionally then the personal relationships also suffer”* (Interviewee 7).

3.9. Impact on Teachers’ Work and Classroom Culture

Culture was perceived to have a broader impact than on just the individuals themselves: *“It impacts on everything causing divisions in staff and when they happen all other areas are affected like discipline and it makes teaching much harder and stressful”* (Interviewee 32).

Participants believed that students were implicitly aware of teacher toxicity and one indicated explicit awareness.

When I booked the computer room she sent one of her students to the staff room to me with an oral message that it was a pointless exercise for me to book the computer room for my students because they were too weak to use a computer properly. This upset me because it was not just me being ridiculed my students were getting it too. (Interviewee 38)

3.10. Participant Insights into Addressing the Issues

School leaders were perceived as having a role in the facilitation or the mitigation of toxic culture, either by not recognising it or by actively colluding with it. The importance of professional development for school leaders in order to heighten their awareness of their role in setting the culture and climate among the staff was identified. Anti-bullying policies were in existence but participants were sensitive to the fact that some of the behaviours constituted low-level incivility and as such would be difficult to articulate in a manner that would be understood or appreciated. For example, participants who complained on their own behalf (Interviewee 41, Interviewee 6) or on behalf of another (Interviewee 7) found that the principal responded by informing them that they were “too sensitive”. While it might appear that the union might be a safe course for redress, this was not always the case. Interviewee 31 believed that raising his issues with the union made him unpopular with

colleagues and resulted in being labelled as a troublemaker, while interviewee 11 explained, *“if you go to your union for help you will be labelled as a militant.”* As a result, participants recommended an external objective redress procedure (along the lines of a workplace ombudsperson for the teaching profession), as currently the policy requires redress by complaining to the school principal, whose impartiality cannot always be guaranteed. Participants also identified lack of overt support from colleagues but they did not articulate resentment; rather, they saw this as logical self-preservation *“they did not wish to draw similar upon themselves”* (Interviewee 41).

4. Discussion

The data here are stark and show forms of incivility that were toxic for the interviewees both personally and professionally, but also for the wider staff culture. They evidence a dark side of workplace culture and workplace interactions. During the analytical process, the researchers sought counter narratives but they were not present in the data. We attribute this to the nature of the study, which invited only those who have experienced workplace bullying to participate. This will have resulted in more negative experiences and perceptions of workplace culture; therefore, bias is inherent in the sampling strategy and in the resultant data and so the authors provide this caution as a lens through which to read this data. This is not to say that these experiences are not valid, quite the contrary, but it is to say that this paper provides a particular perspective. The link between workplace bullying/incivility and workplace culture is well established in the literature [1,2,54]. The types of interactions and workplace culture that participants described were in line with the literature, which identifies that frequency of bullying in an organisation can be influenced by cultural attributes, norms of behaviour, rules of appropriate conduct, organisational values, symbols of importance, unacceptable taboos, styles of heroes, and the degree of expected civility and formality of the culture [54,55]. There were also perceptions of contagion across colleagues and seepage into the awareness of students also. This toxicity was deeply embedded in the interactions and interpersonal processes that were common among the staff and stemmed from several sources, the most notable of which were subject identity, group identity (clique membership) and poor (and at times toxic) leadership behaviours. Poor leadership is identified specifically in the literature as facilitating the prevalence and frequency of workplace bullying as it facilitates social and power inequities that reward poor behaviour, and facilitates low morale in a culture that learns to tolerate bad treatment [54,56].

The literature evidences deepening understanding of the causes and facilitators of workplace incivility and bullying. Once thought to be limited to interpersonal and individual conflict, the literature now evidences antecedents in workplace culture [22,57]. In the same vein, toxic workplace culture is both a cause and a consequence of workplace incivility and workplace bullying. As our understanding of workplace bullying has grown and as the data here demonstrated, poor behaviours were less linked to interpersonal conflicts but rather were linked to the artefacts and manifestations of school culture that are linked to epistemological assumptions (in this case linked to subject hierarchy), group dynamics (cliques), and deficiencies in leadership. Poor workplace culture clearly had adverse impact on the interviewees who described feelings of increased stress, experiences of maladaptive coping strategies, distancing, and desire to leave [58]. Anger is a common coping mechanism in adverse situations [59]. During the interviews, anger was frequently tangible. Conversely, anger can weaken an individual's psychological resource reserves, resulting in further negative emotions [60]. Retaliation and reciprocation of toxic, even bullying behaviours were disclosed by some participants, indicating a negative spiral of toxic behaviours. When incivility is met with more incivility it exacerbates workplace toxicity and the culture become in effect a 'race to the bottom' in terms of the deterioration of workplace conditions. Everyone loses. Some interviewees indicated that it adversely affected their work. Where bullying often results in a lack of job satisfaction and commitment [61], comparable lack of job satisfaction and desire to leave were evident in our data.

Worryingly, lack of job satisfaction has been linked to diminishing teacher effectiveness with adverse impact on students' learning experiences [62].

4.1. Subject Hierarchy as Epistemic Harm

The data evidenced that subject hierarchy was deeply embedded in the experiences of toxicity. According to Bleazby [40] (p. 617), subject hierarchy based upon the assumption that some forms of knowledge are privileged over others "paradoxically undermines some of the very educational goals that it is claimed to promote, including inclusivity and the fostering of reasoning." We would argue that, for the participants in our study, toxic engagements based upon subject hierarchy constituted an epistemic harm. We define epistemic harm by drawing on the work of Steup and Neta [63] in their philosophical exploration of epistemology who have advocated that obstructing an agent's cognitive success constitutes an epistemic harm. They explain that the range of epistemic harms and epistemic wrongs can be much broader than those involving falsehood and deception and can include getting one to think poorly of one's own capacity to grasp a subject by not paying attention to what one thinks or says. Epistemic harm or wrongs can also be achieved by indoctrinating one into a view, so strongly, that one loses the ability to consider alternative views. We have drawn on this and applied it to the toxic experiences of subject hierarchy of our interviewees, the results of which have been detailed earlier. This harm, in our view, is both to the individual and to the organisation via the production of toxic hierarchies. This hierarchy was internalised and manifested in the language used by interviewees themselves. The abuse experienced by teachers of subjects that were perceived to be of less status included losses in teaching time and diverse forms of undermining, that went as far as expressed perception that the teachers of 'academic subjects' were seen as more intelligent than teachers of 'practical subjects'. By nature of their vested 'expertise', opinions of these teachers of 'academic subjects' gained more value, resulting in the practice that teachers of 'academic subjects' are the 'knowing' ones who speak at staff meetings. In this way what counted as 'legitimated knowledge' held more power and had influenced the behaviour at meetings.

4.2. Toxic Humour

That laughter is used as a form of control is not new [64]. Plato makes reference to how laughter is used as a powerful tool in the Republic. This work has been the genesis of the superiority theory of humour, as Plato when examining the power dynamics inherent in this type of laughter concluded that an experience of superiority in mocking or laughter is hurtful and ill intended. Individuals who do not abide to the shared norms of the school often fall victim to this type of humiliation [65] and this emerged in our data. One person's harmless bit of teasing will be another person's cruelty [64]. Challenging toxic or dark humour is difficult without drawing an accusation of being a killjoy. Mills and Carwile [66] advocate that the use of wit, joking and teasing is ambiguous and can challenge or isolate people while maintaining a potential 'out' through humour. However, this potential 'out' can be even more damaging as the target is then accused of 'not taking a joke'. The data here on humour had quite gendered underpinnings. Mallett, Ford, and Woodzicka [67] have pointed to interpretative ambiguity as making it difficult to challenge sexist humour due to risk of accusations of lacking a sense of humour and being too sensitive. The attempts to undermine women through humour, potentially suggest some concerns regarding women who may be seen as threatening to the status quo [68]. Dark humour can become toxic whether intended or otherwise, and is exacerbated when the target cannot defend themselves or simply does not find the 'joke' humorous [69]. Staff meetings were gatherings where toxic humour was "disguised as harsh humour" [69] (p. 231) and because it was unchecked it became normalised.

4.3. Cliques

Cliques can be understood as a close-knit group of people who do not freely allow others to join them. Our data point toward the role of cliques in permeating workplace toxicity. In schools, these cliques have been conceptualised by Ball [20] as characterised by micro-political behaviours. Ball describes, “The structure of social relations in the school is the outcome of ongoing tensions and rivalries, conflicts and realignments which are played out in and through both formal and informal types of context” [20] (p. 213). The dominance and normalisation of these cliques was certainly noteworthy. Adding to the toxicity was the resource power they could exercise with school leaders and was manifest in the attainment of certain privileges such as more favourable timetables. Unity of action certainly appeared to empower these cliques. In keeping with Arendt’s conceptualisation of power as being inherent in the very existence of political communities, we argue that these cliques are empowered as power emerges whenever people get together and act in concert [70] as these cliques did. It becomes reaffirmed whenever individuals act in concert through the medium of speech and persuasion [70], or indeed through control of resources and humour as was evident in our data. The impact of cliques appeared to be linked to and sustained by the tacit and implicit support of school leaders.

4.4. Toxic/Destructive Leadership

Trust is a critical element for effective leadership and governance in schools [71] and was in short supply in the relationships that interviewees alluded to in their interviews. The leadership behaviours discussed by interviewees as a means of controlling employee behaviour included undermining, perceived inequitable resource allocation, unfair privileging in timetabling, non-renewal of contracts, and rejecting of questioning among others. While there is no agreed definition of toxic leadership in the literature, it has been described as the attempt to keep control and influence performance via toxic influence [72] with negative consequences for individuals and organisations. Fahie [73] has pointed to the significant cost of negative workplace interaction with the ‘fallout’ from toxic leadership proving considerable for the individual employee. It is damaging not only for individuals as our data evidence but also for organisations. It behooves organizations to be vigilant to such behaviours and their impact [74]. The irony is not lost then when redress procedures for workplace incivility in schools require staff to complain to the school leader, who may be the one implicitly (sometime explicitly) supporting those who perpetrate it—or indeed be the very person engaging in such behaviour. The literature evidences poor organisational responses to these issues in schools in Ireland [75].

4.5. Distancing Was a Common Response to the Toxic Culture

Distancing from work and disengaging with anyone who exhibited toxic behaviour was common. This type of behaviour is manifest in the literature and many people respond to uncivil behaviours with silence [60]. This isolation, whether imposed or self-created as a coping strategy, appeared normalised among many of the teachers within the study. Multiple participants elected to isolate themselves within their classrooms (avoiding the staff room) as an effective form of control. The complexity of this response is that it serves to further normalise uncivil behaviour. In this study, some engaged in isolation to protect themselves, but, in so doing, further contributed to embedding toxicity in the organisational norms, as it remained unchallenged and as such given further room to flourish. The authors do not express judgement in this comment, as they acknowledge that to protect oneself is a rational and needed self-protective response in the face of overwhelmingly negative workplace relations.

4.6. Power, Agency, and Culture

Being agentic in a workplace culture where misuse of power is felt through micro physics as Foucault termed it, or micro politics as Ball suggests, being played out through ‘in groups’ (cliques) is quite difficult for any employee to do, most especially if leadership is

weak or unsupportive. Sercombe and Donnelly advocate that bullying involves a particular form of behaviour and impact. It is aimed at engendering a kind of helplessness, an inability to act, to do anything. It is an assault on a person's agency [75]. They further elucidate that bullying involves the attempt to deny another any settled place, even a subordinate one and that it goes beyond subjection to abjection [76]. This was the case for the participants in our study and furthermore bullying and toxic work culture denied and reduced their professional agency. It could happen because it was embedded in, and resided within culture and daily interactions. The participants indicated challenging situations and their voices were characterised by lack of agency in being able to address the maltreatment they experienced. The link between power and poor work culture cannot continue to be ignored. Sercombe and Donnelly's [76] insight that what makes bullying so insidious is this systematic stripping away of any lines of avoidance, negotiation, resolution or escape is pertinent. They argue that "normal power relations involve some consent, at least at the level of compliance, on the part of the subordinate person, and give something to the subordinated person as well as take something away" [25,76,77]. Bullying seeks to eliminate any such capacity. This is why it so deeply threatens a person's ontological security, to use Giddens' term, and why thinking about suicide, as some do, is such a rational response [76]. What was noteworthy in our data was that when professional agency was denied to participants, they still exercised forms of personal agency such as personal and professional development as a form of resilience building as it were. Agency was never fully denied, but redirected. Even bystanding was not judged harshly by participants but rather was perceived as an agentic form of self-preservation.

The findings of this study hold several implications for policy and practice. Although the participants had a seemingly good understanding of the behaviours that constituted workplace bullying and incivility, it would benefit school organisations to collectively define and identify behaviours that are seen as workplace bullying, incivility, and toxic culture at all levels of their organisation. In this way, members of the organisation could formulate policies in which informal and formal complaint procedures and specific actions for addressing toxic behaviour are outlined [74,78]. As recommended by Fahie [49], such policy formulation could be accompanied by training interventions for all members of the school community, particularly the members in leadership positions. Professional development for all staff, to heighten awareness of the harmful impact of micro politics might aid addressing toxic culture and bystanding. The suggestion of an external ombudsperson has merit given the power dynamics and cultural interplay between staff members and school leaders that form part of bullying and incivility. Often school leaders may have come from the same staff group having been promoted into leadership and they may bring some unconscious biases with them. There is, to some degree, cultural blindness in school anti-bullying policy that requires a complainant to seek redress via the school principal who may be part of the toxic cultural dynamic [7]. This is certainly worthy of further examination.

School leaders require greater understanding of the power dynamics at play amongst their staff, they need to be able to recognise it and effectively deal with it to eradicate the social inequalities that cliques foster when they wield resource power. School leaders play a vital role in determining school culture [79]; therefore, their recognition of poor uses of power and of toxic culture is a vital first step to changing the culture within a school. Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer, and Ronnerman [80] suggest that middle leaders can more effectively lead staff for collaboration in schools in areas such as teaching and learning. In Ireland, after a moratorium on middle leadership, recently there has been much investment in the building of middle leadership in schools. The authors advocate for investment in professional development of middle leaders to equip them with the vision and skills to foster collaborative cultures in schools and to ensure heightened awareness of the malign impact of poor use of power by school leaders and teachers. Naming and framing how power is exercised in the workplace is an important step in changing workplace culture. The Kettering Research Foundation has found that "who gets to name a problem—and how they

name it—are critical factors that go a long way in determining how effective the response will be” [81] (p. 3). The inclusion of frequent and consistent professional development to raise awareness and educate leaders and aspiring leaders about the negative consequences associated with toxic behaviours is currently absent from the discourse on educational leadership. In particular, leadership education that emphasises the caring and formal dimensions of an ethical climate would be of value [82,83]. The data show that toxic cultures do exist for some and this suggests the need to place emphasis on the need to foster ethical climate in school organisations [83].

4.7. Limitations and Recommendations

The sample for this study was self-selecting and this has obvious implications for generalisability and for respondent bias. The study invited self-selecting participants to an interview on the theme of workplace bullying and incivility. Therefore, it is logical that those who experienced incivility/bullying would be the ones to participate and bring with them a certain bias and as such the authors acknowledge the data are to be read with that in mind and that underlying experiences would influence their perceptions of culture. The authors do not seek to generalise from their results but rather are seeking to open a discourse that explores more meaningfully the link between workplace culture, bullying, and incivility. This is, in effect, a qualitative initial scoping study and the data suggest that there is scope here for further discourse and investigation.

5. Conclusions

The authors are exploring what is becoming known in the literature as the ‘dark side’ of culture and, at times, leadership. We acknowledge that this is a particular perspective and we also acknowledge that there are many schools where toxic experience is unfathomable and that there are exemplars of healthy workplace culture also in abundance.

Workplace culture influences incivility, by affecting the way in which individuals perceive what is valued and how these values become embedded in the daily interactions of the workplace. The link to subject hierarchy and epistemic harm is novel and warrants further investigation. Antecedents in school culture that were linked to epistemological assumptions, group dynamics and deficiencies in leadership were found to act as causes and facilitators of toxic workplace culture. There is a reciprocal dynamic at play in how adverse hierarchies are normalised and played out. Indeed, how people react to incivility is also pivotal, because in this study there was evidence of some contagion, in that uncivil reactions to incivility in effect became a vicious cycle that goes beyond the behaviour of individuals to impact and permeate the entire workplace culture. When workplace bullying and incivility remains unaddressed, it can result in a work environment where teachers are constantly trying to protect themselves at the expense of quality teaching and learning in the classroom.

Embedding the findings of this study within the context of current literature suggests that the concepts of bullying/incivility and workplace culture may be more aligned than previously thought. Further research is required to provide deeper understanding of the reciprocal dynamic of workplace incivility and the implications for workplace culture.

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