Exploring the influence of abusive leadership on teachers' mental well-being in secondary schools

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of abusive leadership on teachers' mental health in secondary schools, with a specific focus on psychological distress, job dissatisfaction, and professional disengagement. The research aims to uncover how negative leadership behaviours influence the emotional and professional well-being of teachers within the schooling environment. A qualitative research approach, using a case study design, was employed to gain in-depth insights into the phenomenon. Fifteen secondary school teachers from diverse backgrounds were purposively selected from schools in the Vhembe District, South Africa. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis of relevant school policies and leadership reports to ensure methodological triangulation. Thematic analysis revealed that abusive leadership significantly undermines teachers' mental health. Key themes included heightened emotional distress and deteriorating psychological well-being, lack of institutional support coupled with fear of retaliation, a negative impact on student academic performance and school culture, and inconsistencies in leadership policies and practices. The findings underscore the detrimental effects of abusive leadership on the professional and emotional state of teachers. The study highlights the urgent need for ethical leadership practices and supportive institutional environments that prioritise the mental health and well-being of educators. The study recommends targeted interventions such as leadership development programmes, the reinforcement of ethical leadership policies, and the implementation of comprehensive institutional support systems. These measures are critical to creating a psychologically safe, professionally nurturing, and high-quality educational environment that supports teacher retention and enhances learning outcomes.

Keywords: Abusive leadership, Mental well-being, Secondary schools, Teacher retention.

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1. Introduction and Background of the Study

Educational research on school leadership has increased locally and globally in recent decades. School leadership shapes teachers' working conditions and well-being [1]. Principals, as the primary authority figures in schools, significantly influence teachers' morale, job satisfaction, and mental health [2]. Effective leadership fosters a positive school climate, enhances teacher productivity, and influences the learning environment, teacher support, and overall school culture, ultimately impacting student outcomes and school success [3]. In contrast, abusive leadership creates a toxic work environment characterised by psychological distress, professional disengagement, and burnout [4]. It is important to note that various leadership styles could be helpful in schools, but it depends on the circumstances, such as authoritative, democratic, and laissez-faire. *Authoritative leadership* refers to leaders who exert significant authority in decision-making processes, frequently depending on their assessments and directions, with limited involvement from teachers or other relevant stakeholders [5]. They have well-defined hierarchies, rigorous adherence to established protocols, and a primary emphasis on effectiveness and organisational structure, characterising this strategy. Similarly, scholars highlighted school leaders' potential role in making teaching attractive or unattractive [6]. However, this perspective is helpful as it shapes the school culture, provides support, fosters a positive environment, and increases job satisfaction [7, 8]. Thus, it can be unattractive as it decreases the school performance of teachers, reduces job satisfaction, and lowers learners' performance [9]. *Democratic leadership* refers to leaders who are distinctive in their ever-changing field of educational leadership because they share decision-making collaborative processes and have an unwavering commitment to diversity mark [10]. They have proactively engaged with teachers, staff, and learners in decision-making. This approach is essential as it allows collective inclusion and input, fosters collaboration, and establishes agreement [11]. *Laissez-faire leadership* refers to leaders who grant teachers' significant autonomy that limits direct involvement and enables stakeholders to exercise decision-making independently [12]. This style differs from the one mentioned and needs more micromanagement and dependence on self-motivation and individual initiative. Under this leadership, teachers are granted the autonomy to explore and implement diverse teaching methodologies. Its flexibility can potentially foster the development of creative and customised instructional strategies that effectively accommodate a wide range of individual learning preferences and styles [13]. For this study, *abusive leadership*, or abusive supervision, refers to leaders who sustained display hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviours, which exclude physical contact, and their subordinates perceive it as detrimental [14]. In this approach, leaders behaved disrespectfully, aggressively, humiliated, and belittlement, negatively influencing teachers' well-being and productivity. Globally, studies have highlighted the detrimental effects of abusive leadership styles in education, with growing concerns about their impact on teacher retention and student learning outcomes [15]. However, in the secondary school context, particularly in developing regions, there remains a gap in research on how teachers' mental health and well-being have been affected by abusive leadership from principals.

Historically, educational leadership models have evolved from authoritarian, hierarchical structures to more collaborative and inclusive approaches [16]. However, remnants of rigid and punitive leadership practices persist, often leading to workplace bullying and emotional distress among teachers. In many secondary schools, principals who adopt abusive leadership styles marked by intimidation, excessive control, and lack of empathy contribute to an environment that undermines professional growth and well-being [17]. The psychological toll of such leadership extends beyond the workplace, affecting teachers' personal lives and overall job commitment. Despite increasing awareness of workplace mental health issues, research on the specific impact of abusive school leadership on teachers remains limited. This study seeks to explore how secondary school teachers perceive the effects of abusive principals on their mental well-being, professional performance, and job satisfaction. For example, abusive principals exhibit behaviours such as excessive control, public humiliation, and psychological intimidation, which negatively impact teachers' motivation, performance, and retention. The long-term effects of such toxic leadership extend beyond individual teachers, influencing school culture, student outcomes, and overall institutional effectiveness [18]. However, limited studies have specifically examined teachers' perceptions of the psychological distress caused by abusive principals, making this a critical research gap.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Summary of Previous Investigations

Research on workplace well-being highlights the impact of toxic leadership across various professional settings. Studies in corporate environments have demonstrated that authoritarian leadership styles contribute to employee burnout and high turnover rates [19]. In the educational sector, Koçak and Demirhan [20] found that "principals' toxic leadership behaviours significantly increase teacher stress levels and reduce their commitment to the profession". Similarly, Su, et al. [21] argued that authoritarian leadership styles create unsustainable working conditions, negatively affecting school performance. The broader relationship between school leadership and teacher retention emphasises that schools with hostile work environments experience higher resignation rates. Additionally, Cao, et al. [22] contend that leadership training programmes often overlook the psychological impact of leadership styles, limiting institutional efforts to address workplace abuse. Despite these findings, research focusing explicitly on teachers' lived experiences under abusive principals remains sparse.

2.2. Identifying Relations, Contradictions, Gaps, and Inconsistencies in Literature

While studies have extensively examined the benefits of transformational leadership in schools, fewer have analysed the direct consequences of abusive leadership. Cao, et al. [22] note that leadership ethics are often underrepresented in principal training programmes, contributing to the persistence of toxic leadership styles. Some research focuses on general teachers' well-being without isolating the specific effects of leadership-related stressors. Moreover, Zhang and Chen [23]

highlighted that leadership styles are context-dependent, with cultural and institutional factors influencing their impact. However, contradictions exist in defining abusive leadership, as some school policies fail to distinguish between strict leadership and outright toxic behaviours. Scholars suggest that leadership effectiveness is subjective, with some teachers tolerating authoritarian styles better than others [24]. This subjectivity creates inconsistencies in evaluating the severity and impact of principal-led abuse.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by two key theoretical perspectives: Social Justice Theory and Workplace Well-Being Theory. These theories provide a lens to examine the impact of abusive principals on teachers' mental well-being, highlighting systemic inequalities in school leadership and their psychological consequences.

3.1. Social Justice Theory

Adekanmbi and Ukpere [25] developed this theory in 2022, emphasising equity, fairness, and ethical leadership in educational institutions. It argued that school leadership should foster inclusive and supportive environments rather than perpetuate hierarchical power imbalances that undermine teachers' professional and mental well-being. Abusive principals often exercise authoritarian control, limiting teachers' agency and reinforcing structural inequalities within the education system [26]. By applying Social Justice Theory, this study critically examines how leadership dynamics affect teachers' psychological safety, advocating for ethical reforms that promote fairness and respect in school management. Workplace well-being theory explores the relationship between leadership styles, work environment, and employee mental health. According to

Smith and Fredricks-Lowman [27] workplace toxicity, characterised by intimidation, excessive control, and psychological abuse, leads to stress, burnout, and reduced job satisfaction among employees, including teachers. This theory is relevant as it helps explain how abusive leadership affects teachers' emotional resilience, professional commitment, and overall well-being. It also informs potential interventions to foster healthier school environments, such as leadership development programmes and policy changes.

3.2. Workplace Well-Being Theory

Combining social justice theory and workplace well-being theory provides a holistic framework for understanding abusive leadership in schools. Social justice theory addresses the ethical and structural dimensions of school leadership, while Workplace well-being theory focuses on the psychological and emotional consequences for teachers. This integration enables a deeper analysis of how leadership abuse manifests in secondary schools and its implications for teacher retention, job performance, and school culture.

3.3. Objective of the study

This study explores the influence of abusive leadership on teachers' mental well-being in secondary schools in the Vhembe district, South Africa. It explores teachers' coping mechanisms and assesses the broader implications for educational management.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Approach and Paradigm

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, allowing for an in-depth exploration of abusive leadership's psychological and professional influence on teachers' mental well-being [28]. The qualitative approach is appropriate for capturing teachers' lived experiences, providing rich, descriptive data that offers insight into the emotional and professional challenges of abusive leadership. The study is grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which focuses on understanding social reality through the subjective experiences of individuals [29]. This paradigm aligns with the study's objective of exploring how teachers interpret and respond to the negative effects of abusive leadership within their school environments. The interpretive paradigm allows for a comprehensive understanding of the issue by emphasising meaning-making and context.

4.2. Research Design

This study employed a case study research design to explore teachers' experiences of abusive leadership and its influence on their mental well-being in secondary schools. The case study method is useful for investigating complex social phenomena within real-life contexts [30]. It enables an in-depth analysis of the leadership behaviours exhibited by school principals and their psychological effects on teachers. The case study design facilitates a holistic understanding of how abusive leadership manifests in secondary schools, incorporating multiple data sources to ensure a well-rounded perspective. This approach enhances the study's credibility by capturing teachers' lived experiences, workplace challenges, and coping mechanisms.

4.3. Participants

The study was conducted in selected secondary schools where cases of abusive leadership had been reported. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select fifteen participants, ensuring a diverse representation of teachers based on gender, years of experience, subject specialisation, and school type. The selection criterion focused on teachers who had either directly experienced or witnessed abusive leadership practices in their schools. Purposive sampling was used to

ensure that participants could provide rich, relevant, and insightful data on the impact of abusive leadership on their mental well-being. This approach allowed the study to capture various perspectives on how leadership styles affect job satisfaction, emotional stability, and professional engagement.

4.4. Research Setting

The study was conducted in secondary schools within the Vhembe district, South Africa, a region known for its diverse educational landscape and leadership challenges. The selection of this setting was based on documented reports of abusive leadership and concerns raised by teachers and educational stakeholders regarding its impact on workplace morale and performance. The schools involved in the study represent a mix of urban, peri-urban, and rural contexts, providing a broader understanding of how abusive leadership manifests across different educational environments. The study aims to provide a contextually rich and comprehensive analysis by examining schools with varying administrative structures and socio-economic conditions.

4.5. Data Collection Techniques
4.5.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews. One-on-one semi-structured interviews provided detailed personal accounts of teachers' experiences with abusive principals, allowing for an in-depth exploration of their perspectives. This method was chosen for its flexibility, enabling researchers to probe deeper into emerging themes while maintaining a structured framework. Semi-structured interviews also fostered open and honest discussions, allowing participants to express their thoughts freely without rigid constraints. Additionally, this approach facilitated a nuanced understanding of the emotional and psychological influence of abusive leadership, capturing rich qualitative data that might not emerge through standardised questionnaires.

4.5.2. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Focus group discussions played a crucial role in exploring the impact of abusive leadership on teachers' mental well-being in secondary schools. These discussions allowed participants to share their experiences, compare perspectives, and identify recurring themes. This study conducted three focus groups, each comprising five teachers, ensuring a diverse yet manageable exchange of insights. The FGDs facilitated dynamic and interactive discussions, enabling teachers to reflect on their experiences collectively and gain a deeper understanding of the psychological effects of abusive leadership. This method also uncovered common stressors, coping mechanisms, and institutional challenges that impact teachers' emotional well-being. Moreover, the group setting fostered a sense of solidarity and mutual support, allowing participants to express their concerns in a safe and validating environment, ultimately enriching the depth and quality of the data collected.

4.5.3. Document Analysis

Document analysis of school policies, disciplinary reports, and leadership records provided valuable contextual insights into leadership practices and institutional responses to abusive leadership in secondary schools. This method complemented interviews and focus group discussions by offering objective evidence of leadership trends, policy enforcement, and administrative decision-making. Christou [31] highlighted that interviews in qualitative research reveal participants' subjective experiences and interpretations, while document analysis strengthens findings by grounding them in institutional records. This approach was essential in identifying inconsistencies between documented policies and actual leadership practices, shedding light on gaps in policy implementation and institutional accountability. Additionally, it provided a historical perspective on leadership patterns, enabling a deeper understanding of how abusive leadership affects teachers' mental well-being over time. By triangulating data from multiple sources, document analysis enhanced the reliability and depth of the study's findings.

4.6. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis identified key themes emerging from the data [32]. The analysis follows a systematic coding process to categorise recurring themes such as psychological distress, burnout, low morale, and coping mechanisms. This study used the NVivo software to analyse qualitative data efficiently, ensuring a structured and comprehensive examination of the findings.

4.7. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval will be obtained from the relevant university ethics committee to ensure compliance with research integrity standards. Participants will provide informed consent before participating in the study, and confidentiality will be maintained through pseudonyms. Additionally, all data will be securely stored, with strict measures to protect participants' anonymity and privacy. Ethical considerations will be guided by established research principles to safeguard the rights and well-being of participants [33]. The findings' trustworthiness and validity enable triangulation using multiple data sources, including interviews, FGDs, and document analysis. Member checking is employed, allowing participants to review transcripts to confirm the accuracy of their statements. Furthermore, peer debriefing will be conducted, where discussions with fellow researchers will help validate interpretations and minimise potential biases in the analysis.

5. Findings

5.1. Influence of Abusive Leadership on Teachers' Mental Well-Being in Secondary Schools

5.1.1. Emotional Distress and Psychological Well-Being

Teachers across various schools reported experiencing extreme stress, anxiety, depression, public humiliation, and demotivation due to the abusive leadership and behaviours of their principals.

5.1.2. Stress

The participants' responses demonstrated that abusive leadership could cause teachers' stress at secondary schools.

> *"Mentally exhausted every day before even entering the school"* (Teacher, School B).
>
> *"I constantly worry about making even minor mistakes because I know they will be blown out of proportion by the principal"* (Teacher, School A).

5.1.3. Anxiety

The participants' responses showed that abusive leadership from principals could cause teachers' anxiety at secondary schools. Teachers experienced panic attacks and internal fear due to constant criticism and belittlement from management leadership. The abstract of the two teachers said:

> *"The principal's intimidation tactics have created an unbearable environment, leading some colleagues to take extended sick leave due to mental breakdowns"* (Teacher, School B).
>
> *"Every staff meeting feels like a battlefield where we are constantly attacked rather than supported"* (Teacher, School C).

5.1.4. Depression

The participants' responses revealed that teachers are depressed due to the abusive leadership of the principals at secondary schools. They indicated that they had developed chronic headaches and difficulty sleeping.

> *"I was admitted as I am developing chronic headaches and difficulty sleeping…"* (Teacher, School C).
>
> *"I feel emotionally drained and have lost my passion for teaching. I dread coming to work every day"* (Teacher, School A).

5.1.5. Public humiliation

The participants' responses revealed that teachers felt humiliated in public due to the abusive leadership of the principals at secondary schools. They have been disgraced in public at the school premises. The extract of one teacher from a school illustrates this.

> *"I feel trapped in a workplace where my well-being is completely disregarded"* (Teacher, School C).
>
> *"I was called out and insulted in front of my colleagues and learners, making me feel completely worthless"* (Teacher, School D).

The findings indicate that abusive leadership contributes to a toxic work environment, severely impacting teachers' mental health. Many teachers expressed helplessness, frustration, and a lack of motivation, leading to lower job satisfaction and decreased classroom effectiveness. Without intervention, these negative experiences may result in high teacher turnover and a decline in educational quality.

5.1.6. Demotivation

The participants' responses reported that abusive leadership could demotivate teachers and diminish their enthusiasm for teaching. Some teachers mentioned losing their passion for teaching due to the abusive behaviours of principals. Two teachers from the same school highlighted the following:

> *"Lost the passion for teaching because their efforts were never recognised but instead met with harsh criticism"* (Teacher, School A).
>
> *"I used to enjoy going the extra mile for my students, but now I just do the bare minimum to survive"* (Teacher, School A).

From the abovementioned information, a teacher explained that they no longer engaged in extra-curricular activities or lesson improvements because of abusive school leadership.

> *"There is no point in trying when the principal constantly undermines and ridicules us"* (Teacher, School B).

Likewise, a teacher from School C stated they were actively seeking employment elsewhere because:

> *"They could not continue working under a leader who disrespects and devalues teachers"* (Teacher, School C).

The findings demonstrate how abusive leadership leads to disengagement, negatively affecting teacher performance and student outcomes. When teachers feel unappreciated and demoralised, their commitment to delivering quality education declines. This ultimately contributes to higher attrition rates, weakening overall school stability and effectiveness.

5.1.7. Lack of institutional support

The participants' responses indicated that a recurring concern among participants was the absence of institutional support and the fear of reprisal for speaking out against abusive principals. Teachers mentioned that their school governing body protected principals at the expense of teachers. The extract from two teachers from different schools stated the following:

"Even when we report the principal's behaviours to the district office, nothing is done. It is as if our complaints disappear into thin air" (Teacher, School A).

"Completely ineffective and sided with the principal, making it impossible to seek justice" (Teacher, School C).

These findings highlight the need for stronger oversight and support systems to protect teachers from abusive leadership. Teachers remain vulnerable to mistreatment without clear and enforceable policies, leading to a culture of silence and resignation. Effective institutional support mechanisms, such as independent reporting channels and leadership accountability measures, ensure a fair and professional working environment.

5.2. Fear of Retaliation

The participants' responses showed that abusive leadership could cause the fear of retaliation among teachers at secondary schools. Teachers stated that their colleagues were forced to resign after attempting to file a grievance, emphasising that:

"Many teachers choose to suffer in silence because those who raise concerns are either transferred to remote schools or demoted." (Teacher, School A)

Similarly, a teacher from another school added this:

"Teachers are scared to challenge authority due to the harsh consequences" (Teacher, School B)

Other participants reported instances where those who spoke out against abusive leadership faced threats, intimidation, or exclusion from school activities. The fear of professional repercussions, such as negative performance evaluations or denial of promotions, prevented teachers from acting against mistreatment. Some teachers also mentioned that their workload was intentionally increased after they voiced concerns, making their jobs even more stressful. The lack of a secure and confidential reporting system further compounded their fear, reinforcing the perception that no real support existed for those experiencing abuse. This toxic environment fosters helplessness, with teachers feeling trapped in an unjust system.

5.3. Poor Students' Academic Performance and School Culture

The participants' responses indicated that abusive leadership could cause poor student academic performance and overall school culture. The extract from one teacher explained this:

"Students are aware of how poorly we are treated, and it affects their respect for us in the classroom" (Teacher, School A).

Another teacher from the same school mentioned that its academic performance had declined:

"...Because teachers are demoralised, and this reflects in their teaching quality" (Teacher, School A)

"Discipline issues among students have increased because they see the principal mistreating teachers, which sets a poor example" (Teacher, School B)

Similarly, another teacher from a school highlighted this:

"The toxic atmosphere in the school is affecting students' enthusiasm for learning, as they sense the negativity among teachers" (Teacher, School C).

These findings suggested abusive leadership has far-reaching consequences, extending beyond teachers to the students and the school environment. When teachers are emotionally distressed and disengaged, their ability to provide quality education diminishes, leading to a decline in student performance. Furthermore, when students witness teachers being mistreated, it undermines respect for authority and contributes to a disruptive school culture. Addressing leadership issues is, therefore, crucial in creating a positive and productive learning environment.

5.4. Inconsistencies In Leadership Policies and Practices

The document analysis of school policies revealed inconsistencies in leadership policies and practices between the stated principles of leadership ethics and the actual practices of abusive principals. While policies emphasised fairness, professionalism, and respect in leadership, the teachers' testimonies painted a different picture. The extracts from three teachers pointed out these.

"Our principal disregards all ethical guidelines, and there is no mechanism to hold them accountable" (Teacher, School B).

Another participant from the same school added this,

"The leadership code of conduct is just a formality; in reality, it is not enforced" (Teacher, School A).

"The district office claims to promote ethical leadership, yet they ignore complaints against principals" (Teacher, School B).

Likewise, a teacher from School C noted that leadership training programmes existed but were not mandatory, allowing some principals to continue their abusive behaviours unchecked. These findings reveal a gap between policy and practice, highlighting the need for stronger accountability measures in school leadership.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that abusive leadership in secondary schools has severe consequences for teachers' mental well-being, motivation, and professional engagement. Teachers subjected to persistent intimidation, public humiliation, and lack of respect reported high levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout. Many described experiencing emotional distress, declining motivation, and feelings of helplessness, which significantly impacted their job performance

and personal lives. Additionally, the lack of institutional support and the fear of retaliation prevented teachers from reporting abusive principals, further exacerbating their struggles. The study also found that the negative effects of toxic leadership extended beyond teachers, affecting student learning and the overall school environment.

Furthermore, inconsistencies in leadership policies and practices highlighted the failure of existing accountability mechanisms to address the issue effectively. The findings align with existing literature on workplace bullying and toxic leadership, which suggests that authoritarian and abusive leadership styles create environments of fear, low morale, and diminished professional engagement [34]. The emotional distress reported by teachers supports theories of occupational stress, which argue that high job demands coupled with low support led to burnout and job dissatisfaction [35]. Moreover, the absence of institutional intervention reinforces the argument that ineffective governance structures contribute to the persistence of toxic leadership.

From a psychological perspective, the study demonstrates how prolonged exposure to workplace abuse can lead to emotional exhaustion, loss of self-esteem, and even symptoms of depression among teachers. The erosion of motivation and professional engagement aligns with Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, which suggests that negative work conditions, such as abusive leadership, act as strong demotivators, reducing job satisfaction and performance [36]. Additionally, the findings highlight how the toxic culture created by abusive principals affects not only teachers but also students and school functionality. The observed decline in student discipline and academic performance aligns with studies that link teacher well-being to student outcomes, emphasising the interconnected nature of school environments [37]. The contradictions between policy and practice identified in the document analysis further demonstrate systemic failures in leadership oversight. While educational policies advocate for ethical leadership and teacher well-being, the reality experienced by participants suggests that these guidelines are not enforced effectively. This gap between policy and practice reflects a broader issue of leadership accountability within the education system, emphasising the need for stronger oversight and enforcement mechanisms.

7. Conclusion

This study has critically examined the impact of abusive principals on teachers' mental well-being in secondary schools, highlighting the profound psychological, professional, and institutional consequences of toxic leadership. The findings reveal that teachers who experience workplace abuse suffer from emotional distress, burnout, and declining job satisfaction, which ultimately affects their performance and the overall school environment. The lack of institutional support and fear of retaliation further exacerbates their struggles, leading to an atmosphere of fear and disengagement within schools. The literature confirms that abusive leadership significantly impacts teachers' mental well-being, yet gaps remain in understanding the specific mechanisms through which this occurs. By further exploring teachers' lived experiences, this study contributes to the discourse on ethical leadership in education, advocating for reforms prioritising psychological safety and professional dignity in secondary schools.

This study provides rich, detailed insights into the psychological impact of toxic school leadership by using qualitative methods within a case study framework. The findings illustrate the detrimental effects of abusive leadership on teachers' mental well-being, motivation, and professional engagement. The emotional distress, lack of institutional support, and negative school culture created by toxic leadership necessitate urgent reforms in school governance. By interpreting the findings through psychological, organisational, and educational lenses, it becomes evident that addressing toxic leadership is critical for fostering healthy school cultures. The study's implications call for urgent reforms in leadership accountability, professional development, and institutional support systems to ensure that secondary schools become safe and conducive spaces for teachers and students. This study recommends fostering ethical leadership and ensuring psychological safety in schools. This study contributes to the discourse on ethical leadership in education and advocates for policies promoting supportive and psychologically safe school environments. It provides insights into the broader implications for teacher retention, school effectiveness, and policy reform in educational leadership. This study recommends further research to address these gaps by exploring how teachers perceive and cope with abusive leadership in different educational contexts. Future studies should investigate intervention strategies, including support mechanisms for teachers and policy reforms that promote ethical leadership. Additionally, longitudinal studies examining the long-term effects of abusive principals on teacher attrition and school culture are necessary. By adopting a mixed-methods approach, researchers can triangulate qualitative insights with quantitative data to understand this issue comprehensively.

8. Practical Implications

These findings have implications for practices for various educational stakeholders such as policymakers, teachers, principals, and leadership programme developers. Strong accountability mechanisms are needed to address abusive leadership in schools. It is essential to implement anonymous reporting systems, regularly evaluate leadership performance, and establish clear disciplinary actions for principals who engage in abusive behaviours. Without robust oversight, teachers should endure toxic leadership in silence, harming the school environment and effectiveness. The training programmes must incorporate psychological and ethical leadership components to equip principals with the necessary skills and create supportive systems and positive workplace environments. The findings revealed that many instances of abusive leadership arise from a lack of emotional intelligence and inadequate conflict resolution skills. The envisaged training may enhance these areas, which can help reduce workplace toxicity and foster a more collaborative school culture.

The findings highlighted the role of teachers' mental well-being in maintaining a productive and effective school environment. Educational systems should provide teachers with adequate mental health support services, such as counselling, peer support groups, and professional development initiatives focusing on stress management. By addressing

teachers' burnout and providing emotional support, schools can reduce attrition rates and improve retention, which, in turn, benefits the overall quality of education.

The findings also advocated a cultural shift in leadership practices, moving from fear-based leadership to collaboration, respect, and inclusivity. School governing bodies and district offices should proactively monitor leadership behaviours, ensuring teachers feel safe and supported in their workplaces. Furthermore, involving teachers in decision-making can promote a more inclusive and respectful school culture. The findings showed that addressing abusive leadership is not just a matter of protecting teachers but also vital to safeguarding the quality of education. Teachers who feel valued, supported, and psychologically safe are likelier to engage positively with their students, leading to improved learning outcomes. Therefore, educational reforms must prioritise ethical leadership as a fundamental aspect of school governance to enhance teacher and student experiences in secondary schools.

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