Euro Afro Studies International Journal® (EASIJ.COM)

The Menace of Toxic Leadership in School Organisations

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Abstract:

A number of studies have been dedicated to underseeing the various kind of positive leadership in schools and neglected the toxic aspects of school leadership which is important to identify the behaviours of school leaders who intentionally and unknowingly inflict enduring damage on their subordinates and school organisation. At present, it seems there is little for public school leaders to learn in terms of the types of behaviours that should be discouraged in the schools among the school leaders. This work is a position paper highlighting the havoc of toxic leadership in the school organisations. Therefore, this work focuses on toxic leadership in school organisations, viz: toxic dimensions, issues revolve around toxic triangle, and coping strategies for teachers with toxic school leaders. Leadership toxicity in school organisation has a negative impact on the school setting and the teachers' psychological well-being. Toxic leadership exist in every organisation, including school. In addition, recommendations include school teachers should be exposed to professional development training and opportunities particularly in leadership before placement for leadership positions, as leadership preparation and training are central to school effectiveness and school improvement and qualified consultants, that is, personnel specialists with expertise in organisational leadership should be engaged during the search and selection process of school leaders so as to detect toxic leaders in waiting.

Keywords: Toxic Leadership, School Organisation, Coping Strategies, Toxic Triangle,

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1. Introduction

Of all resources in any organisation, including education manpower plays an important role in the organisation's ability to grow and continuously evolve. The success of school is dependent upon the collection of individuals, including the school leaders and followers, and the amount of effort both the leaders and followers put into it. Therefore, school leadership is often regarded as the most important factor in the success and failure of school as an organisation.

Leadership in education has to do with the active use of a person's ability, and talents towards influencing others in the achievement of common or preconceived educational goals. Educational leadership is important in school as an organisation, as a result of its all-embracing effects on the accomplishment of school objectives, policies, and programmes. Therefore, the role of leadership in education is to co-ordinate the activities and aspirations of school members as followers (Orunbon, 2020).

Ideally, leadership–followership relationships in school system should be filled with rewards, sense of belonging, freedom in job operations, showing of recognition, and competency for both parties. Despite that, for teachers who have assumed higher position in the school setting, this relationship may also form the basis for maltreatment, abuse, and punishment, accompanied by teachers' feelings of frustration, anxiety, uncertainty, and displeasure.

School leadership is central to improved quality schooling, teachers' diligence, commitment and productivity in senior secondary schools. Therefore, Principals' leadership roles are crucial to the attainment of goals, aims and objectives of the school. It then becomes important to examine the dark side of leadership in school organisations. Meanwhile, research on leadership has not been balanced with respect to bad and good leaders; the majority of studies have dedicated on the effective aspects of leadership in schools more than the negative ones. Although it should be understood that effective and authentic leadership is very important for developing school managers, on the other side of the coin, it is equally imperative to identify the behaviours of school leaders who intentionally or unknowingly inflict enduring damage on their teachers and school organisation.

Moreover, it could be observed that research on indispensable leadership behaviours has enabled leaders in public senior secondary school settings to attempt to adapt and align their behaviour to mirror frequently accepted leadership qualities. Such alignment, although influenced heavily by positive and effective leadership research, thereby looks down upon the lessons and opportunities that may be generated by research on the other side of leadership such as toxic leadership behaviour. At present, it seems there is little for public school leaders to learn in terms of the types of behaviours that should be discouraged in the schools among the school leaders.

2. Review of Literature

Toxic derives from Greek mythology: ***toxicus*** means "poison" Whicker (1996) was the first to link toxicity with leadership and discussed in her research three types of leaders within workplaces: "trustworthy (green light), the transitional (yellow light), and the toxic (red light)."

The term "toxic leader" first appeared in 1996 (Wicker, 1996), but as yet no standard definition of toxic leadership exists. Indeed, a variety of terms that refer to the same phenomenon can be found in the literature. Whicker (1996) offered that toxic leaders are bullies, enforcers, and street fighters, maladjusted, malcontent, and often malevolent and malicious people, who succeed by tearing others down and glory in turf protection, fighting, and controlling others rather than uplifting followers, that have deep–seated but well–disguised sense of personal inadequacy, selfish values, and cleverness at concealing deceit.

Kellerman (2004) uses "bad leadership," while others (Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007) use the term "destructive leadership." However, "toxic leadership" increasingly is becoming the preferred label for leadership that harms an organization (whether a school, business, a political state, or a religious). Lipman-Blumen (2005, 2010), one of the first to pioneer research into toxic leadership, defined it as "...a process in which leaders, by dint of their destructive behaviour and/or dysfunctional personal characteristics, inflict serious and enduring harm on their followers, their organizations, and non-followers, alike".

Williams (2005) extended this definition by noting that toxic leadership appears in degrees, from the clueless who cause minor harm to the overtly evil who inflict serious damage. Williams stated, 'At one end of the spectrum, dysfunctional leaders may simply be unskilled, unproductive and completely unaware of the fact that they are lacking in the necessary talent to lead. At the other extreme, toxic leaders will find their success and glory in their destruction of others. Be it psychological or even physical, they will thrive on the damage they can inflict on others'.

According to Reed (2004), identified the three key elements of the toxic leader syndrome which are:

1. An apparent lack of concern for the wellbeing of subordinates.
2. A personality or interpersonal technique that negatively affects organizational climate.
3. A conviction by subordinates that the leader is motivated primarily by self-interest.

Wilson-Starks (2003) view toxic leadership as an approach that harms people and, eventually, the organisation as well. Toxic leaders in school environment, teachers are recompensed for aligning with the school leaders and punished for challenging the status quo of the school organisations. In a toxic leadership environment, particularly in the school setting, the conformists and colluders, who always conform to the dictate of the toxic leaders and those followers who often collude with toxic leaders to unleash toxicity are rewarded with juice committees and attendant of different seminars, workshops, training and development programmes courtesy of their leaders while those teachers who are actively engage in the work of the school and also use their mental ability to bring desired changes in the system are sidelined and they are considered as rebels and leftists.

Toxic leaders have negative leadership tendencies such as insincere leadership; treating followers unjustly; not backing followers; distorting/withholding information, practicing face saving; acting disloyally, authoritarian behaviour; attacking followers personally; being inapproachable; acting inconsiderately/ruthlessly, exploitative leadership; exerting pres-sure on followers; threatening/scaring followers; pushing goals and regulations; not

involving/passing followers; not offering scope for followers; involving oneself too much into daily work; being inconsistent/unreliable; not bearing responsibility, being inconstant; being inauthentic/not convincing; communicating insuf-ficiently; and not recognizing/motivating (Schilling 2009).

Steele (2004) noted that toxic leaders are usually not incompetent or ineffective leaders in terms of accomplishing explicit mission objectives. He said many times they are strong leaders who have the right stuff, but just in the wrong intensity, and with the wrong desired end-state, namely self-promotion above all else.

Their modus operandi is culture of fear. The subordinates are threatened with negative consequences which seems interesting sometimes as a direct and easy technique to achieve the task but infuse toxicity to the organizational climate (Singh, Sengupta & Dev 2017).

Egan (2004) reported different types of toxic leaders as accidental, destructive-narcissistic, and psychopathic leaders. Accidental toxic leaders were those who are truly unaware of the effect of toxic actions on others (Egan, 2004). This type of toxic leader caused harm by lacking patience or using inappropriate comments or actions towards others. When confronted, this type of toxic leader apologized and retreated from his or her behaviours (Egan, 2004). Destructive-narcissistic toxic leaders were those who portray themselves as possessing self-importance, causing others to perceive them as acting superior and self-domineering. Egan claimed that toxic behaviours made the leaders manipulate and exploit others to move ahead and attain ideal fantasies. Though this type of toxic leader is very reluctant to change, he or she may change with time and persistence. The psychopathic toxic leaders bullied others for fun and lacked feelings of remorse, guilt or empathy (Mathieu & Babiak, 2016). This type of toxic leader can be considered as the most dangerous, because the leaders with the psychopathic trait in their leadership style lacked insight into personal behaviours and were unwilling to change (Egan, 2004).

Lipman-Blumen (2005) provided the following enduring dysfunctional qualities of character marking the toxic leader:

i. Lack of integrity that reveals leaders as cynical, corrupt, or untrustworthy
ii. Insatiable ambition that prompts leaders to put their own sustained power, glory, and fortunes above their followers' well-being;
iii. Enormous egos that blind leaders to the shortcomings of their own character and thus limit their capacity for self-renewal;
iv. Arrogance that prevents toxic leaders from acknowledging their mistakes and, instead, leads to blaming others;
v. Amorality that makes it nigh impossible for toxic leaders to discern right from wrong;
vi. Avarice that drives leaders to put money and what money can buy at the top of their list;
vii. Reckless disregard for the costs of their actions to others, as well as to themselves;
viii. Cowardice that leads them to shrink from the difficult choices; and
ix. Failure both to understand the nature of relevant problems and to act competently and effectively in situations requiring leadership.

3. Toxic Leadership Dimensions

According to Schmidt (2008) the following are the dimensions of toxic leadership in every organisation:

1.   **Self-Promotion:** Toxic leaders frequently take all the credit for their team's success and their employees' good work. Toxic leaders here take all the glories of any work done by the subordinates. To the extent that in a school organisation, the supervisors to the schools always see such school leaders as a role models in terms of achievement. It is assumed that the school leaders are actually responsible for the good results in the schools engagements.

2.   **Abusive Supervision:** Toxic leaders abuse their employees. They always the first in publicly debase and emotionally reproach their subordinates, often unforgetful of the past wrongdoing of the followers and reminding them of their past incapable of success. Abusive supervision is one dimension of toxic leadership that has been thoroughly researched, and the results are clear: employees with abusive supervisors are less satisfied (Ensley, 2004), less committed (Aryee, Sun, Chen & Debrah, 2007), and are more deviant toward their fellow co-workers (Mawritz, Mayer, Hoobler, Wayne & Marinova, 2012) and the organisation as a whole.

3.   **Unpredictability:** A unique trait among toxic leaders, especially when compared to other office jerks or workplace bullies, is that they are unpredictable. Employees never know what kind of behaviour to expect, and this unpredictability keeps everyone on edge all the time. In essence, when followers are more often exposed to toxic leadership unpredictability stance, they always have defensive mechanism as shield for them against such leaders. Situation like this in school organisations always put teachers on their toes so as not to offend the school leaders.

4.   **Narcissism:** Toxic leaders have an unrealistically positive view of themselves and their ideas. They often ignore and minimize their employees' suggestions, assuming that if the idea is not theirs, it is not good. Narcissistic school leaders have little or no empathy for the teachers as their followers. They have no interest in any condition of their subordinate. They always show contemptuous indifference, self-centred and arrogant. Dame and Gedmin (2013) have the following to say about this kind of leadership: Narcissism combines an exaggerated sense of one's own abilities and achievements with a constant need for attention, affirmation, and praise. The narcissist lacks self-awareness and empathy and is often hypersensitive to criticism or perceived insults. He or she frequently exaggerates contributions and claims to be "expert" at many different things. If you are part of an organisation with a leader exhibiting such characteristics, you have a problem.

5.   **Authoritarianism:** Toxic leaders micromanage their employees. It is suffice to say therefore that, toxic leaders in schools do not care about the learning of the subordinates or team building, instead at every given opportunity; they see them as worthless persons and act as if the subordinates are nothing more than the tools for them to use.

Toxic leadership in school setting actions include: the deliberate exclusion of certain groups within the school, open favouritism of some subordinates over others, using existing personal relationships within the school to influence the progression of some school teachers and not

others and suppress the opinions of those considered to be a potential threat to the existing state of affairs.

Schools are complex, unpredictable social organisations that are extremely vulnerable to a host of powerful external and internal influence. Successful leaders also want to secure the highest possible standards, but whereas the toxic leader may be doing this because they are worried about the consequences of failure or to boost their egos, the successful leader's actions are grounded in a deeper moral purpose (Hopkins, Stringfield, Harris, Stoll & Mackay, 2014).

4. WHY TOXIC LEADERS IN SCHOOL ORGANISATION?

Toxic leaders in school setting involve dominance, coercion, and manipulation, as opposed to effective leaders who use influence, persuasion, and encouragement. Toxic leaders never evolve overnight it is a combined chain of relationship with other elements around the so called toxic leaders. This can be viewed from the submissions of Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser (2007) on the concept of toxic triangle.
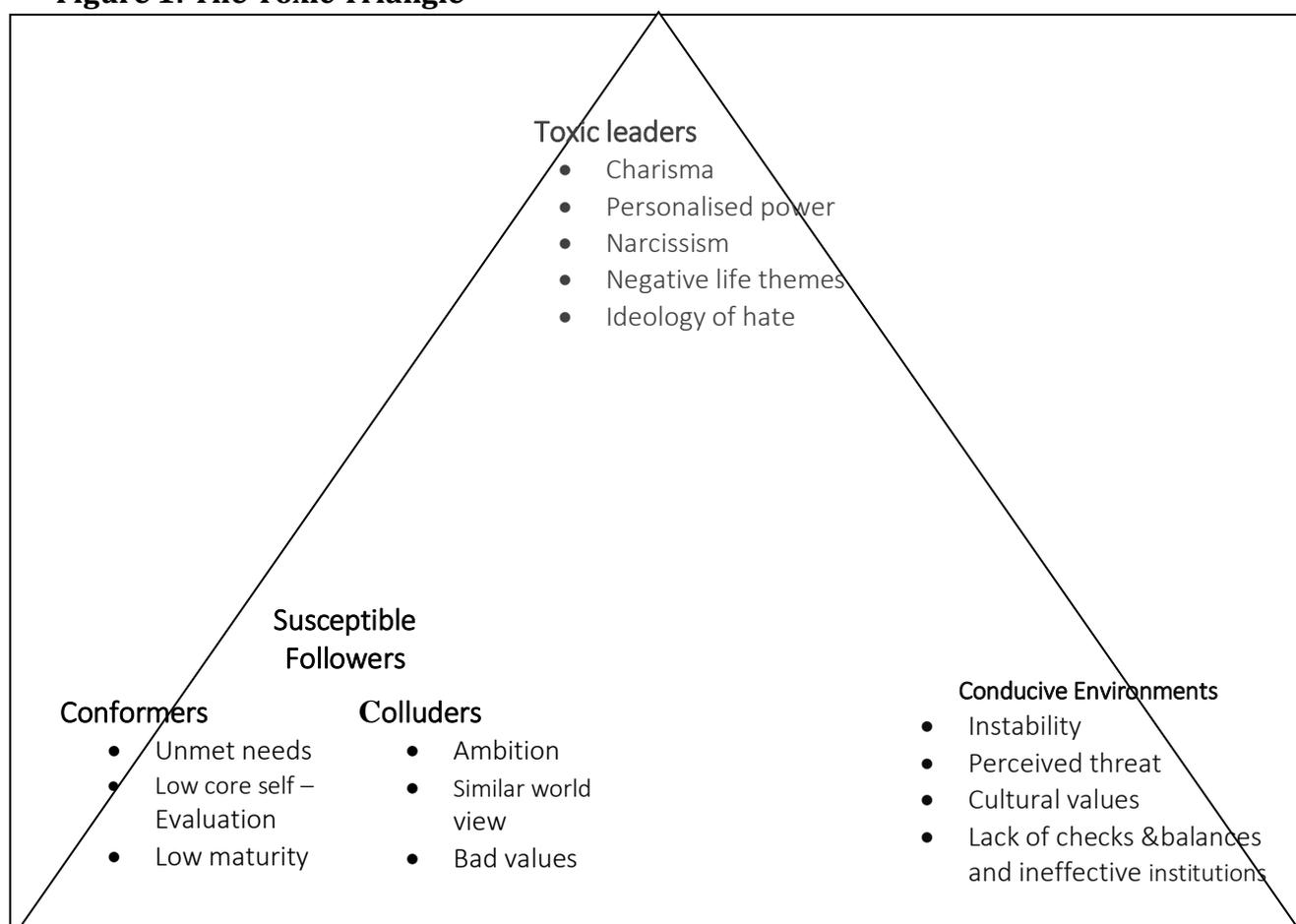
Figure 1: The Toxic Triangle

Figure1: Toxic triangle which is composed by Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser (2007).

Source: The toxic triangle: Elements in three domains related to toxic leadership (Padilla *et al.*, 2007).

1. Toxic/Destructive Leader

Toxic leaders are at the top of the triangle indicating that it has an important presence in the toxic triangle (Padilla *et al.*, 2007). Toxic leaders tend to process a constellation of traits that lead to coercive behaviour rather than persuasive behaviour. In a school setting toxic leaders always use positional power through the instrumentality of force, intimidation, manipulation, and coercion to get things done. Instead of building bridges for the school teachers, walls are built to keep followers away from the leaders.

i. Charisma

Charisma has been studied as a characteristic that might influence "toxic leadership" (Padilla, Hogan & Kaiser 2007). However, one must bear in mind that not all charismatic leaders are "infected" by "toxicity"; and not all leaders with a "toxic" behaviour are charismatic. One component of charismatic has been widely recognised: leaders' ability to use the language to convince or their impressive rhetorical skill. If a leader uses his or her rhetorical skills to convince his or her followers for his or her self-interest, it will be likely he or she is "infected" by toxicity.

ii. Personalized need for power

As charismatic and narcissistic traits, the "need for power" appears to be another notion for toxic leadership. It has been demonstrated that possessing an excessive need for power might conduct to "toxic" leadership (Kellerman 2004; O'Connor, Mumford, Clifton, Gessner, & Connelly, 1995; Padilla, Hogan & Kaiser 2007). When school leaders get power, the leadership status becomes personal; they feel on top of others and they use their power to control everything: teachers, students and tasks.

iii. Narcissism

Higgs (2009) illustrated Freud's theory by showing that narcissism can be viewed through three signs: "self-admiration, self-aggrandizement and a tendency to see others as an extreme of the self". Most of the time, narcissism is connected with negative behaviours but several authors assert that leaders with this trait can lead to positive performance: "productive narcissism" (Maccoby 2000).

iv. Negative life themes

These leaders in most cases have deep rooted psychological problems, e.g. low self esteem, lack of trust in people, paranoia, and low confidence. Some of them have even been exposed to toxic leadership and because of that, they have a distorted view of how people should be led, thinking their way is the ideal way. They are not aware that leadership is not an action. It is meant to be an interaction between the followers and the person they chose to help them achieve their goals; the leader (Wilson-Starks, 2003).

For instance, Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser (2007) pointed out that some circumstances might conduct to "toxic" leadership: "parental discord, marriage problem, low socioeconomic status, paternal criminality or child abuse". If the leader has a "negative life theme", he or she will have a bad view of the world.

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2. Susceptible Followers

All followers do not react in the same way to toxic leaders; however, they may be categories into two broad categories: colluders or conformers. Colluders are usually in support of the toxic leader by morally and actively engrossing in dubious behaviours because there is a reward from the toxic leader for them to do so. It suffices to say therefore that, colluders are not deceived into immoral behaviours, nor that because of fear of the consequences of not doing the bid of the toxic leader, but intentionally engage in these behaviours because of the benefits that will come out of it which will serve the selfish needs of the colluder.

Conformers passively support the toxic leader through their acquiescence. These susceptible followers are more likely to be present if they have unmet basic needs, low maturity, and lower core self evaluations (Padilla, *et al*, 2007). A leader "infected" by "toxicity" might use followers' "unmet basic needs" (Padilla, *et al* 2007) to impose him or her as leader of a group. "Conformers" are seen as vulnerable because of their needs for safety, belonging, and their low self-esteem (Padilla, *et al* 2007).

3. Conducive Environments

An organisation's culture can be predicative of the personnel's behaviour and outcomes in different situations (Aubrey, 2012). Environment always give toxic leaders ample opportunity to exhibit their toxicity, situations like instability, perceived threats, general organisational culture, ethics, favouritism and absence of checks and balances can give room for leaders' toxicity. It is easier for toxic leaders to assume position of power in an unstable environment. Subordinates are looking for security and certainty and to meet the unmet needs. As a result, leaders that can offer to meet these needs are easily accepted.

Toxic leaders always grow vigorously in the school organisations known to condone unethical behaviour and misconduct such as favouritism. Moreover, if the school organisation values and encourages the wrong thing, both leaders and subordinates will partake in misconduct or unethical behaviour while acknowledging it as normal since it has become rooted in their culture.

5. Coping Strategies for Teachers with Toxic School Leaders

It seems that toxic leadership remain inevitable in the leadership process because ones toxic leader is another person's hero. Therefore, toxic leadership is not an anomaly, but to be expected. Even leaders who are widely applauded as exemplary are not necessarily without their occasional toxic chinks (Lipman Blumen, 2005). Therefore, five coping strategies were found to be used by school teachers/victims to cope with Toxic leaders

1. **Seek help:** The seek help or communication strategy of coping involved seeking assistance from friends, co-workers, another leader, or human resource department (Dauber & Tavernier, 2011) and this was the most common employed. Employees actively reached out for help to handle the situation (Aubrey, 2012). Most followers seeking help talked to a representative at work from a union or human resource department (Olafsson & Johannsdottir, 2004). Bushman and Huesmann (2010) claimed that reporting the matter to proper authorities resulted in the best outcomes

due to most organisations having a no retaliation policy. Accessing influential action was an alternative option, where affected employee filed a complaint to authorities as a method of seeking help (Lutgen-Sandvik & Nmaie, 2010). Simons and Sauer (2013) advised that seeking help might be the most appropriate form of coping as all toxic events must be addressed, even if the result seems unfavourable.

2. **Avoidance:** Avoidance is a passive coping strategy used by followers who prefer to reduce or eliminate contact with the toxic leader. Richardson (1995) defined avoidance as ignoring conflict by withdrawing or suppressing one's feelings and avoiding the topic of what had happened or is happening. Avoiding difficult individuals or situations minimizes the risk of conflict or a repeat toxic event. This coping strategy also includes keeping an emotional distance by isolating themselves from the toxic leader (Dauber & Tavernier, 2011). Depending on the victim's personality, it may be easier to use avoidance rather than aggression regardless of the stress levels experiencing. Even though avoiding toxic leaders was a passive withdrawal from potential conflict and confrontation, active avoidance occurred when victims dealt with toxic leaders by physically staying away. Unfortunately, it is not always possible to avoid these leaders in the workplace, particularly if the leader is one's supervisor (Richardson, 1995). In such cases, victims avoided conflict by suppressing their opinions; and adopted avoidance as a preventative measure and solution for dealing with toxic leaders. Avoidance was the most difficult coping strategy to accomplish when employees work directly for toxic leaders. Cloke and Goldsmith (2011) believed that this coping strategy, when confronted with a toxic leader, is a part of the fight or flight mentality. In a study by Olafsson and Johannsdottir (2004), avoidance was the second most used coping strategies; and it is simply easier and less stressful to avoid the bullying of a superior.

3. **Assertiveness:** Affected employees use assertiveness to directly confront toxic leaders about the toxic event, effects, and behaviours. Aubrey (2012) referred to assertiveness as retaliation or deviance from acceptable leader-follower relationships. Out of all coping strategies, assertiveness was used least frequently when communicating directly with the toxic leader. Assertiveness towards a leader who caused the employee stress may relieve the stress by reducing the toxic behaviour (Chan, 2007). This action may cause adverse effects on the employees, however, as assertiveness often leads to increased occurrences of toxic events or bullying. Bushman and Huesmann (2010) found that assertive victims of toxic events may become aggressive when confronting the leaders, which may result in shouting, verbal insults, and physical intimidation. Simons and Sauer (2013) argued that assertiveness in the form of confrontation is an effective way of coping as it often stops the bullying. In extreme cases, victims of continued toxic leadership or corporate bullying threatened to physically harm others, as a means to stop the situation (Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012). The assertive coping strategies, such as face-to-face confrontations, were

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characteristic of aggressive behaviour at the extreme end of the assertive strategy triggered by anger, fear, and being emotional scarred.

4. **Forgiveness:** Another coping strategy used by victims of toxic leadership is to forgive toxic leaders and simply move on from the situation. This coping strategy may result in the least stress if affected employees can truly move forward without harbouring resentment towards the toxic leader. The researchers argued that forgiving people was best suited to cope with workplace toxicity because they exhibited effective skills to communicate and resolve conflicts, create and sustain social relationships, and learn necessary peace concepts.

5. **Do nothing:** The do-nothing strategy of coping may be the most stressful method. Olafsson and Johannsdottir (2004) found that the toxic events were likely to continue causing stress, reactions, and behaviours derived from the toxic event to continue and potentially grow. This coping strategy may lead to the worsening of negative effects of toxic leadership on the organisations. The do-nothing strategy is closely related to the adaption (Dauber & Tavernier, 2011) and the accommodation or reframing strategy (Webster, Brough & Daly, 2014). These coping strategies fall under the cognitive theory of trauma in which you reason through the event by restructuring your perception then adapting versus coping in another fashion.

6. Conclusion

The significance of this study lies in its capacity to create awareness on the menace of toxic leadership in school organisations. The focus of this study therefore, is on toxic leadership behaviours specifically of school leaders. The higher the level of individual in the school organisation, the more power they have at their disposal, if this power is used to enforce dysfunctional behaviours the consequences could spread through the school organisation because of the legitimate or position power which the individual has from his/her position within the school organisation. That most obvious place to begin to examine the toxicity of schools is with school leadership. It is worthy to note that toxic leaders in the school setting do not realize the toxicity of themselves, mostly focus on their abreast success while turning a blind eye on their long-term and permanent harm on the subordinates. Toxic leadership leads to many negative outputs in the workplace.

In the final analysis, it can be concluded that, toxic leadership behaviour in any school setting, undermine every positive efforts of school teachers which ultimately leading to deterioration in teachers' productivity, that is the productivity of the school will be decreased in terms of students' academic performance. Therefore, toxic, harmful attitudes and behaviours be proactively monitored and addressed objectively within the school system.

7. Recommendations

It is against this background that the following recommendations are made.

1. School teachers should be exposed to professional development training and opportunities particularly in leadership before placement for leadership positions, as leadership preparation and training are central to school effectiveness and school improvement.

2. Qualified consultants, that is, personnel specialists with expertise in organisational leadership should be engaged during the search and selection process of school leaders so as to detect toxic leaders in waiting.

3. Appointment or selection of teachers into school leadership positions (Principals or Vice-principals) should be based on past records of the teacher devoid of toxic trace.

4. Ministries of Education should establish ethics ombudsperson to usually investigate allegations of school leader toxicity in various schools.

5. Stakeholders in education should continue to lay more emphasis on the need for school leaders to exhibit good leadership ability in the day-to-day administration of the school, so as to create non-toxic atmosphere for teachers.

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