



Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

Book Review

Crying in Cupboards: What Happens when Teachers are Bullied?

Bricheno, Patricia, and Mary Thornton. Kibworth Beauchamp: Matador, 2016.

Edgar A Burns

La Trobe University

e.burns@latrobe.edu.au

ORCID: 0000-0002-6645-3358

Paulina Billett

La Trobe University

p.billett@latrobe.edu.au

ORCID: 0000-0003-3938-637X

Rochelle Fogelgarn

La Trobe University

r.fogelgarn@latrobe.edu.au

ORCID: 0000-0001-6485-0408

In researching Australian teachers' experiences of being bullied, this readable account reports first-hand stories of frontline educators as relayed to two experienced UK academics and it provides a clear introduction to the field. *Crying in Cupboards* is based on interviews with 39 teachers across a variety of towns and regions in UK schools, with various levels of seniority, and later follow-up interviews. Additionally, some principals and union staff were interviewed and their comments provide second-level interpretations of the anonymous/synthesised scripts of the teachers' experiences of being bullied and complements quantitative surveys conducted in other studies by teacher unions and academic researchers.

Whereas surveys attempt to gain insight into the scale of bullying against teachers, this qualitative study provides "inside" information about how bullying develops, is sustained, and is or is not remedied. Such research helps delineate processes of being bullied and elaborates this in terms of how official channels, roles and conduct allow or lead to this happening. The book empathetically describes the events, interactions, and often harrowing accounts of professional destruction and experiences of personal defeat.

While this text serves as an exemplar of qualitative educational research it would benefit through further illuminating schooling, teaching and learning issues in rural, regional and remote environments. The authors state their study parameters covered areas of Scotland, Wales and England and note that their research participants came from "different schools and geographic areas" (p. 69). However, the study does not attempt to compare or contrast rural and non-rural environments, with these terms absent in the discussion and the term 'Local' only appearing a few times and mostly referring to local authorities or teachers' writing to the local newspaper (p. 124).

To their credit, the authors categorise the study participants' stories using gender, seniority and age, and this would have benefited through the addition of a rural-urban or a township-city-metropolitan style typology. The authors indicate this data was gathered as part of the research and access to this data would enhance the usefulness of the book for rural education discussions concerning the problem of teacher targeted bullying and harassment.

Having said that, in reviewing this text we are keen to praise the authors as the teaching sector, at all levels, needs more social research methodologies applied to a diversity of topics and issues in teaching and learning; including rural education. The proviso here would be that this information needs to be applied, and distinguished when relevant, with a rural and regional eye. We say this as sociologists and educational researchers, in no way rejecting surveys and the importance of counting/measuring the problem of teachers being bullied but seeing the value-add that qualitative work also offers in understanding complex phenomena.

Furthering research in Australia on teacher wellbeing and its antithesis teacher targeted bullying and harassment is paramount. Examining potential differences in how bullying against teachers occurs and what this means for teachers then justifies specific investigation into the occurrence and dimensions of the problem in rural settings where issues like transport, housing, relatives, leisure, social networks, and accessing health care all potentially play out differently.

Our own exploratory empirical work has provided accounts of bullying directed against teachers in small regional towns. As we have worked through the evidence of our survey and semi-structured interviews, our online survey was not location-specific, but in our qualitative analysis elements of rural location came to the fore in some instances, and we are working further on this aspect (Billett, Fogelgarn & Burns, 2019; Burns, Fogelgarn, Billett, 2020; Fogelgarn, Burns & Billett, 2019). At the same time, in encouraging rural education inquiry, we want to avoid an essentialist or oppositional view that rural education is inherently different and contrasting. That even explicitly rural studies such as Stockdale, Hangaduambo, Duys, Larson, & Sarvela, (2002) are not clear about defining bullying and bullying directed against teachers indicate important opportunities for research given their observation of “*high prevalence*” in US rural areas (p. 275) that would include Australian settings. While the rural bullying study by Farmer et al. (2012) again shows the focus on students, rather than teachers, as recipients of bullying and harassment.

It is an empirical matter how best the blight of teachers’ being the subject of bullying behaviours can be researched and documented. Further reflections for rural educationalists that might be drawn from Bricheno and Thornton’s research include the following:

1. We find ourselves surprised at a dated view in the book of sociological research portrayed as being structuralist. This may derive from last-century perceptions of UK stratification workplace research by John Goldthorpe (1969) and colleagues. But this was far from characteristic of social research then, and much less so today. Such a stance denies itself the immense resources that sociology-related educational research disciplines can bring to bear—for example, Arlie Hochschild’s (1983) concepts of ‘emotional labour’ and ‘emotion work’ is highly relevant to teachers and teaching practice.
2. Teacher targeted bullying and harassment remains mysterious: why is this growing problem still less-than-nameable? It is commonplace to talk today about students being bullied by other students, teachers, parents—today often linked to cyber-bullying. Teachers being bullied is significantly outside the public imagination—aren’t they the persons with authority? Even writing, ‘teachers being bullied’ is passive-voice phrasing requiring constant vigilance to distinguish from students being bullied. The phrase ‘teacher bullying’ is ambiguous and discursively defaults to teachers as the *agent* not the *recipient* of untoward behaviour.
3. Teachers having been bullied and choosing to leave the profession fall into general exiting/churn statistics and this is inadequately quantified. Any percentage of exiting is cumulatively important in national training, churn, retraining and wellbeing costs. This is especially the case in rural and remote areas where it is not easy to attract staff. The importance of Bricheno and Thornton’s book is that sometimes narratives like theirs, not the purity of numbers, is what helps convince authorities to make policy and funding changes.

These abuse stories can be read on their own. Many of the teachers were unwell at the time of interview. They volunteered to talk about their experiences, partly cathartic, partly hopeful of helping others. The authors avoid optimism, saying they are:

unable to offer any real hope for the current future. Because it is likely that the bullying of teachers will remain a problem in schools for as long as the government, Ofsted, and league tables continue to operate in ways that seem to encourage and facilitate it (Thornton, 2016).

Our sense is that cultural-national contexts need different cause-and-effect foci around teacher targeted bullying. Bricheno and Thornton's description of Ofsted managerialist-audit culture is chilling to Australian readers. United States literature talks about students' physical violence as an important ingredient that includes a racialized dimension (Espelage, et al., 2013). Bricheno and Thornton say, "when a teacher is being bullied, the bully is often (but not always) the head teacher—who [themselves] is increasingly stressed". This is significant, but not necessarily parallel to Australian patterns of bullying and harassment against teachers by colleagues, students, or parents, as seen in previously published studies. One United States news outlet stated, "Teachers reported that students were most often behind the verbal intimidation, obscene gestures, cyberbullying, physical offenses, theft or damage to personal property" (Goldberg, 2013).

Second author Thornton's (2016) *Conversation* article about school bullying culture describes impacts of bullying on mental health, teachers developing anxiety, stress and depression. Thornton states: "the symptoms they described included palpitations, shaking uncontrollably, crying a lot, drinking too much, raised blood pressure, and taking multiple medications". At present, websites used by Bricheno and Thornton to find interviewees, seem to be important supports for teachers to make explicit this un-talked about issue. Bricheno and Thornton explain further their personal engagement with participants in their own research work:

When we first interviewed the teachers many were ill, and some were very ill indeed. But they willingly gave their time, and opened up the pain of being bullied into ill-health, to two stranger researchers in order that we could help to tell their stories. They actively keep in touch; most of them regularly updating us on their personal and professional progress, which we hope is towards a full recovery.

Despite the important problem of teachers being bullied, Thornton observes, "few teachers or researchers are talking about it". Goldberg (2013) concurs: "People are very eager to talk about [teacher victimization] amongst co-workers and amongst friends, but they're very hesitant to report it to authorities or to the media". Comments on the Espelage et al. (2013) report also support Bricheno and Thornton: "Bullying among students and peer groups is a hot topic... but talking about teacher victimization is considered taboo" (Schargel Consulting Group, 2020).

Bricheno and Thornton's qualitative interview approach is imperative in complex, sensitive, fields. We might desire more analysis and conceptualisation beyond straightforward description, but developing research means creating a field. Crossing borders of cyber, managerial and physical presence in how people interact, is a valuable advance. More such authentic accounts, in rural and urban settings, of teacher targeted bullying and harassment may in the long-term, help better position teachers safely in their work.

References

- Billett, P., Fogelgarn, R., & Burns, E. A. (2019). *Teacher targeted bullying and harassment by students and parents: Report from an Australian exploratory survey*. La Trobe University, Melbourne, Vic. Retrieved from Melbourne, Vic.
- Bricheno, P., & Thornton, M. (2016). *Crying in cupboards: What happens when teachers are bullied?* Leicestershire: Matador.

- Burns, E. A., Fogelgarn, R., & Billett, P. (2020). Teacher-targeted bullying and harassment in Australian schools: A challenge to teacher wellbeing. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 41(4), 523-538. doi:10.1080/01425692.2020.1755227
- Espelage, D., Anderman, E. M., Brown, V. E., Jones, A., Lane, K. L., McMahon, S. D., ... Reynolds, C. R. (2013). Understanding and preventing violence directed against teachers: Recommendations for a national research, practice and policy agenda. *American Psychologist*, 68(2), 75-87. doi:10.1037/a0031307
- Farmer, T. W., Petrin, R., Brooks, D. S., Hamm, J. V., Lambert, K., & Gravelle, M. (2012). Bullying involvement and the school adjustment of rural students with and without disabilities. 20(1), 19-37. doi:10.1177/1063426610392039
- Fogelgarn, R., Burns, E. A., & Billett, P. (2019). Teacher-targeted bullying and harassment in Australian schools: A challenge to teacher professionalism. In A. Gutierrez, J. Gox, & C. Alexander (Eds.), *Professionalism and teacher education: Voices from policy and practice* (pp. 175-198). Singapore/Germany: Springer.
- Goldberg, S. (2013). When teachers are the bully's target. *CNN International*. <http://schoolsofthought.blogs.cnn.com/2013/03/11/when-teachers-are-the-bullys-target/>
- Goldthorpe, J. H. (1969). *The affluent worker in the class structure*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Schargel Consulting Group, 2020, *The Bullying of Teachers*, Retrieved from <https://schargel.com/2013/03/15/the-bullying-of-teachers/>
- Stockdale, M. S., Hangaduambo, S., Duys, D., Larson, K., & Sarvela, P. D. (2002). Rural elementary students', parents', and teachers' perceptions of bullying. *American Journal of Health Behavior*, 26(4), 266-277. doi:10.5993/ajhb.26.4.3
- Thornton, M. (2016). How a culture of bullying is driving teachers from their jobs. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/how-a-culture-of-bullying-is-driving-teachers-from-their-jobs-68256>