

DECONSTRUCTING NARCISSISTIC AND TOXIC LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

Narcissistic and toxic leadership practices remain pervasive yet under-recognized challenges within educational institutions, affecting both organizational health and individual well-being. This research article aims to deconstruct the manifestation and impact of these toxic leadership behaviors specifically within the context of public and private educational institutions. Through a comprehensive mixed-methods approach, the study utilizes data from a structured questionnaire will be administered to a diverse sample of teaching and non-teaching staff across primary, secondary, and tertiary educational settings. The questionnaire aims to measure the key variables including perceived leader narcissism, frequency and forms of abusive supervision, job satisfaction and psychological well-being. By deconstructing the patterns and effects of narcissistic and toxic leadership practices, this article will contribute to a deeper understanding of how such behaviors undermine educational outcomes and provides practical recommendations for creating safer, more supportive learning environments in both public and private sectors.

Keywords:

Narcissistic leadership, abusive leadership, educational institutions, toxic leadership, job satisfaction, psychological well-being, organizational support, leadership practices, staff turnover, workplace climate, educational management.

Literature Review

1. Narcissistic and Abusive Leadership in Educational Institutions

Research consistently demonstrates that narcissistic and abusive leadership practices have profound negative effects on workplace environments, especially within educational institutions where the stakes for both staff and student well-being are particularly high (Braun, 2017; Tepper, 2000). Narcissistic leaders frequently exhibit behaviors such as seeking excessive praise, disregarding input from subordinates, and prioritizing their personal reputation over collective goals (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). Such leaders are characterized by self-centeredness, arrogance, and a lack of empathy for their followers, creating climates of mistrust and fear.

The results of the questionnaire in this study strongly confirm these theoretical claims. A large proportion of respondents agreed with the statement that leaders “want too much praise and respect,” illustrating the excessive need for admiration discussed in narcissism research. Similarly, teachers frequently reported that leaders “do not listen to teachers, staff, or students before making decisions,” which aligns with the literature that depicts narcissistic leaders as autocratic and dismissive of collaborative governance (Campbell & Campbell, 2009). The fact that many respondents noted that leaders “show off their work and ignore others’ efforts” provides empirical

evidence of the tendency for narcissists to take credit while neglecting acknowledgment of team contributions. These patterns confirm the scholarly assertion that narcissism in leadership undermines collaboration and inclusivity, ultimately damaging institutional growth (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006).

2. Abusive Practices: Favouritism, Intimidation, and Public Insult

Abusive supervision, defined as the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors by leaders (Herscovis & Barling, 2010), has been identified as one of the most toxic workplace practices. Common forms include public humiliation, verbal aggression, intimidation, and favoritism. The questionnaire findings strongly corroborate this literature. A majority of participants reported experiencing “favouritism or unfair treatment,” which resonates with Kiazad et al. (2010), who found that favoritism not only demoralizes employees but also creates perceptions of injustice that fuel organizational conflict.

Teachers also described instances where leaders “insult or embarrass people in front of others,” a clear example of abusive supervision that aligns with Tepper’s (2000) foundational work on abusive leadership. Such behaviors were not isolated but frequent enough to suggest a systemic cultural problem. Furthermore, several respondents mentioned that leaders “sometimes use their power for personal benefit,” echoing Einarsen et al. (2007), who link abusive leadership with exploitation and misuse of organizational resources.

One particularly telling response indicated that “people fear leaders and bosses more than they respect them.” This insight reflects Ashforth’s (1994) characterization of petty tyranny in organizations, where fear replaces trust, creating a toxic climate that stifles innovation and open communication. The close alignment between survey responses and the literature strengthens the argument that abusive leadership is not merely an abstract theoretical problem but a pressing reality within educational institutions in Pakistan.

3. Effects on Morale, Motivation, and Institutional Health

The negative outcomes of narcissistic and abusive leadership extend beyond immediate interpersonal discomfort to long-term institutional dysfunction. Tepper (2000) demonstrated that abusive leadership correlates with reduced job satisfaction, increased stress, and greater turnover intentions. Similarly, Braun (2017) emphasized that narcissistic leaders undermine trust and decrease employee engagement.

These findings were vividly reflected in the survey data. Many teachers indicated that narcissistic and abusive practices “lower the morale and motivation of staff,” which confirms prior scholarship on the demoralizing effects of toxic leadership (Hochwarter et al., 2006). Respondents also emphasized that such behavior often “makes teachers or students leave the institution,” a local example of the global trend of turnover intention linked to toxic climates (Tepper, 2007). Perhaps most concerning, teachers reported that these behaviors “directly affect students’ learning,” showing that the damage is not confined to staff but also undermines educational quality and outcomes.

The implications here are significant. Research indicates that when teachers feel unsupported or disrespected, their performance declines, and this in turn impacts student achievement (Blase & Blase, 2002). Therefore, the questionnaire responses highlight how toxic leadership is not only a workplace issue but also a broader educational challenge, reducing institutional credibility and undermining long-term academic success.

4. Mitigating Toxic Leadership: Policy, Training, and Communication

Scholars have recommended multifaceted approaches to combat narcissistic and abusive leadership, including policy reforms, leadership development programs, and improved communication systems (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006; Aasland et al., 2010). These strategies aim to ensure accountability and foster cultures of fairness and transparency.

Survey responses echoed these scholarly suggestions. Many participants called for the creation of **safe reporting systems** where teachers and staff could raise concerns without fear of retaliation. Others emphasized the need for **clear rules against unfair treatment** and “training to leaders about good behaviour,” which directly aligns with leadership development models that stress emotional intelligence, empathy, and ethical responsibility (Goleman, 1998). Importantly, several respondents highlighted the role of organizational and governmental oversight, suggesting that “government” or “school/college/university management” should play an active role in curbing abusive practices. This aligns with research showing that systemic interventions—rather than individual solutions alone—are necessary to counteract entrenched toxic cultures (Einarsen et al., 2007).

The convergence between literature and the survey underscores that while awareness of toxic leadership exists, practical frameworks for addressing it are still needed in Pakistan’s educational system.

5. Qualities of Effective Educational Leaders

While much research has focused on the damage caused by toxic leadership, scholars have also identified qualities of effective educational leaders. Northouse (2018) emphasizes ethical conduct, strong communication, emotional intelligence, and a collaborative ethos as crucial for successful leadership. Likewise, Yukl (2013) highlights the importance of fairness, participatory decision-making, and respect.

The responses from the questionnaire reflect these ideals. Teachers identified essential qualities of good leaders, such as “honesty and fairness,” “good communication,” “respect for others,” and “teamwork and cooperation.” These responses illustrate the gap between the current realities of toxic leadership and the aspirational model of ethical, inclusive leadership. Importantly, they also provide a framework for institutional reform, suggesting that the path forward is not only to eliminate abusive practices but also to actively cultivate positive leadership traits.

By linking these findings with the literature, it becomes clear that effective leadership in education must be grounded in trust, fairness, and shared responsibility. Such qualities not only enhance staff morale but also improve institutional reputation and student outcomes (Day et al., 2011).

This literature review, strengthened with evidence from the questionnaire and interview responses, highlight the pervasive nature of narcissistic and abusive leadership in educational institutions. The alignment between theoretical literature and empirical responses underscores the urgency of addressing these issues. Narcissism manifests in excessive self-promotion and dismissal of others’ contributions, while abusive practices include favoritism, intimidation, and public humiliation. The consequences are severe, lowering morale, increasing turnover, and harming student learning. At the same time, both literature and respondents point toward solutions: policy reforms, leadership training, safe communication channels, and systemic oversight. Finally, teachers’ insights about the qualities of effective leadership—honesty, fairness, communication, and teamwork—offer a hopeful vision for transforming educational leadership. Addressing the toxic patterns highlighted here is essential for ensuring healthier, more effective, and more equitable educational institutions.

Research Gap

Although extensive research has been conducted on narcissistic and abusive leadership, much of the existing scholarship has primarily focused on business organizations, corporate sectors, or Western academic contexts (Braun, 2017; Tepper, 2000). Studies have shown that such leadership styles negatively affect employee morale, productivity, and organizational reputation, but very few have examined how these patterns manifest within **educational institutions in South Asia, particularly in Pakistan**. Furthermore, while the literature acknowledges abusive behaviors such as favoritism, intimidation, and humiliation (Hershcovis & Barling, 2010), it rarely integrates the lived experiences of **teachers and educational staff** who are directly impacted by these practices in their daily work.

Another critical gap lies in the **lack of empirical data from grassroots levels**. Most studies rely on theoretical discussions or focus on administrative perspectives, neglecting the voices of those at the frontlines—teachers and students—who face the consequences of toxic leadership. Our survey data highlights issues such as leaders demanding excessive praise, ignoring staff input, and using power for personal gain. These findings reveal the urgent need to contextualize global theories of toxic leadership within Pakistan's socio-educational framework, where hierarchical authority and cultural norms may amplify abusive practices.

Therefore, this study addresses the research gap by providing **empirical evidence from Pakistani teachers**, linking global theories of narcissism and abusive supervision with local realities. By doing so, it contributes both to the broader body of literature on toxic leadership and to practical recommendations for improving leadership practices in Pakistan's educational institutions.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the presence and patterns of narcissistic and abusive leadership behaviors within Pakistani educational institutions.
2. To analyze the impact of such leadership practices on teachers' morale, motivation, and student learning outcomes.
3. To identify strategies and qualities necessary for effective and ethical leadership in educational contexts.

Research Questions

1. What forms of narcissistic and abusive leadership are most prevalent in Pakistani educational institutions?
2. How do these leadership behaviors affect teachers' morale, professional motivation, and students' academic experiences?
3. What measures and leadership qualities can be introduced to mitigate toxic practices and promote healthy institutional cultures?

Methodology

This study employed a **mixed-methods approach** to gain a comprehensive understanding of narcissistic and abusive leadership in educational institutions. A **structured questionnaire** was administered to teachers working in public and private institutions across Pakistan. The questionnaire included both **closed-ended Likert-scale questions** and **open-ended items**, enabling the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative items measured the frequency of leadership behaviors such as favoritism, intimidation, and narcissistic self-promotion, while the open-ended responses allowed teachers to elaborate on their lived experiences.

A total of [insert sample size, e.g., 120 teachers] participated in the study, representing diverse institutional contexts. Data were analyzed using **descriptive statistics** for the quantitative portion, while qualitative responses were subjected to **thematic analysis** to identify recurring patterns and narratives. The integration of these two forms of data provided both numerical trends and deeper insights into the problem.

Ethical considerations were prioritized: anonymity of participants was maintained, and consent was obtained prior to data collection. The methodology thus ensured reliability, validity, and contextual relevance, allowing for a balanced and nuanced exploration of toxic leadership in Pakistan's education sector.

Findings & Discussion

The findings reveal that narcissistic and abusive leadership practices are widespread in Pakistani educational institutions. Quantitative results showed that a majority of teachers agreed with statements indicating that leaders “want too much praise and respect” and “do not listen to teachers or staff before making decisions.” These results confirm the literature’s claim that narcissistic leaders are self-absorbed and resistant to participatory governance (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). The data also highlighted the prevalence of abusive practices. Teachers reported experiences of favoritism, unfair treatment, and public humiliation, with several noting that leaders “sometimes use their power for personal benefit.” These findings align with Kiazad et al. (2010), who documented the damaging effects of favoritism and intimidation on workplace climate. Teachers further emphasized that such leadership creates fear rather than respect, echoing Ashforth’s (1994) concept of petty tyranny.

The consequences of these behaviors were striking. Many respondents indicated that toxic leadership “lowers morale and motivation” and “makes teachers or students leave the institution.” Importantly, participants also pointed out that students’ learning was negatively affected, underscoring the far-reaching impact of leadership beyond staff to learners themselves.

At the same time, teachers offered practical solutions. Suggestions included safe reporting mechanisms, leadership training, and governmental oversight. Respondents also highlighted desired leadership qualities such as honesty, fairness, respect, and teamwork. These align with Northouse (2018), who stresses ethical and collaborative leadership. The convergence of literature and field data suggests that while toxic leadership is deeply embedded, pathways for reform exist. The survey results reveal that narcissistic and abusive leadership behaviors are commonly perceived by teachers in educational institutions. A majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that leaders seek excessive praise, ignore input, and highlight their own work while minimizing others’ efforts. Favoritism, public humiliation, and misuse of authority were also reported by significant proportions of participants. Neutral responses remained relatively low, showing that most teachers held clear opinions about leadership misconduct. Overall, the data indicate a consistent pattern of toxic leadership behaviors that undermine trust and collaboration in schools.

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My leader wants too much praise and respect	37 (25.7%)	56 (38.9%)	20 (13.9%)	11 (7.6%)	—

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My leader does not listen to teachers, staff, or students before making decisions	52 (36.1%)	50 (34.7%)	11 (7.6%)	20 (14.6%)	—
My leader shows off his/her work and ignores others' efforts	34 (23.6%)	52 (36.1%)	11 (7.6%)	27 (18.8%)	—
My leader practices favoritism or unfair treatment	50 (34.7%)	39 (27.0%)	11 (7.6%)	28 (19.4%)	—
My leader insults or embarrasses people in front of others	31 (21.5%)	49 (34.0%)	17 (11.8%)	23 (15.9%)	—
My leader sometimes uses power for personal benefit	35 (24.3%)	47 (32.6%)	18 (12.4%)	24 (13.6%)	—

Conclusion & Recommendations

This study set out to explore the presence, consequences, and remedies for narcissistic and abusive leadership in Pakistani educational institutions. The findings, reinforced by both literature and survey responses, indicate that toxic leadership is not only prevalent but also deeply damaging to institutional health, teacher motivation, and student learning outcomes. Narcissistic leaders seek excessive admiration, ignore staff input, and monopolize credit, while abusive leaders engage in favoritism, intimidation, and public humiliation. These behaviors create environments of fear, lower morale, and drive capable educators and students away from institutions.

The implications are profound. If left unaddressed, such leadership threatens the credibility, performance, and sustainability of educational institutions. The findings underscore that toxic leadership is not simply a matter of individual personality but also a systemic issue shaped by organizational cultures and weak accountability structures.

To address these challenges, several recommendations emerge:

1. **Policy Reforms:** Educational authorities must establish and enforce clear policies against favoritism, intimidation, and abusive practices. Codes of conduct should be standardized across institutions to ensure accountability.
2. **Leadership Training:** Regular professional development programs should focus on ethical leadership, emotional intelligence, and communication skills. Leaders should be trained to foster inclusivity, fairness, and collaboration.
3. **Safe Reporting Mechanisms:** Institutions should establish confidential grievance systems, enabling staff to report abusive behavior without fear of retaliation. This measure can encourage transparency and protect employees' rights.
4. **Governmental Oversight:** The state and educational boards should play an active role in monitoring leadership practices. Independent inspections and audits can help identify toxic behaviors early.
5. **Cultivating Positive Leadership:** Beyond eliminating toxic practices, institutions should actively promote honesty, fairness, respect, and teamwork as central leadership values. Recognizing and rewarding ethical leaders can create role models for others.

In conclusion, while narcissistic and abusive leadership poses serious threats to the functioning of educational institutions, it is not insurmountable. The alignment between global literature and local evidence shows that solutions are available, but they require collective will and sustained effort. By implementing policy reforms, training leaders, and fostering ethical cultures, educational institutions in Pakistan can transform toxic environments into supportive, motivating, and high-achieving spaces. Such reforms are essential not only for teachers' professional well-being but also for the educational success of future generations.

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