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The Paradox of Leadership: Toxic Education Leadership in the Learning Institutions

Jada Pasquale Yengkopiong, PhD¹*

¹ Catholic Education Western Australia, 50 Ruislip St, West Leederville WA 6007

* Author for Correspondence ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2345-5863>; Email: jadalajuka@yahoo.com.au

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Leadership practice in learning institutions is a paradox and it is now of interest to scholars, the secular, and religious authorities. Unfortunately, the objectives of leadership, as a system, in the learning institutions, are the least understood by the leaders themselves. In these learning institutions, exemplary leaders are ideal, but with the magnitude of corrupt leaders in society, it is difficult to nurture exemplary leadership. Presently, the conditions that undermine teachers' effectiveness in the learning institutions must be identified and promptly rectified. These conditions include actions and behaviours of toxic education leaders. These leaders discourage teachers from performing their duties. This study aimed to document the actions and behaviours of toxic education leaders in learning institutions. The study was carried out using ethnographic, social constructivism, and pragmatic approaches between 2013 and 2023 in five learning institutions in Western Australia. It is reported that toxic cultures in learning institutions develop because of actions and behaviours of toxic education leaders. These toxic leaders are content with the status quo because their leadership capabilities are stuck in their juvenile growth stage, making them incapable of transcending the leadership scale. The leaders allow the institutions to breed incompetence and incrimination, almost always with contempt, frustrating the efforts of teachers, leading to teacher shortages. These actions and behaviours of toxic leaders lead to mistrust and discontent in learning institutions. It is concluded that by regularly moderating the actions and behaviours of toxic education leaders, there may be a reduction in incidents of out-of-value behaviours and eliminating toxic and poisonous conducts that lead to unethical actions in learning institutions.

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INTRODUCTION

Our learning institutions are inundated with corruption, egoism, extremism, self-centered, and self-conceited actions and behaviours of toxic education leaders. These actions and behaviours continue to destroy the nature of human beings. As stated elsewhere, good and virtuous actions build good character, but bad and vicious actions leave humans in moral inertia and deformity (Cessario, 2013). Unfortunately, in the 21st century, our learning institutions continue to harbour many toxic education leaders in the government, religious, or independent learning institutions, leading to vicious actions and deformity in society. Presently, these actions and behaviours of the toxic education leaders are gaining the attention of scholars, practitioners, secular, and religious authorities (Amanchukwu et al., 2015), and therefore, the reason for the current ethnographic, social constructivism, and pragmatic study. In the study, *toxic education leadership* is defined as a system where education leaders who include the principals, deputy principals, heads of curricula, heads of learning areas, and middle managers use their leadership positions, their destructive behaviours, and dysfunctional personal characteristics to generate consistent profound perverse, abusive, and enduring poisonous effects on individual staff, teachers, and the entire learning institution.

As a system, leadership is a term which includes exemplary and toxic leaders. It is also the most observed, cherished, but often despised. In learning institutions, actions of exemplary leaders have led to student triumphs and academic successes (Adibe, 2008; Slutsky et al., 2005; Zlochower, 2002) and the well-being of the teaching workforce. Over the years, however, arbitrary harmful effects, toxic and destructive leadership styles, and the consequences of the appalling actions and behaviours of toxic education leaders are gaining the attention of the research community (Bhandarker & Rai, 2019;

Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013). How well can education leaders manage change without creating chaos in the learning institutions?

However, despite the paradoxical styles and actions of leaders in learning institutions, exemplary and effective leaders inspire, motivate, and direct the actions and activities of their subordinates and help them achieve group or organizational goals (Kan & Parry, 2004). Leaders with these qualities are urgently needed in our learning institutions, not because it is our demand, but because they are essential for the greater good of society. Education leaders should be courageous, visionary, passionate, flexible, inspiring, innovative, imaginative, experimental, and initiate change for the good of those involved and the learning institutions. As Kouzes and Posner (2007) proposed, exemplary leaders model the way for others to follow, inspire others for a shared vision, challenge the status quo for others to flourish, enable others to act for the good of all, and encourage the heart of many to yearn for good and do service.

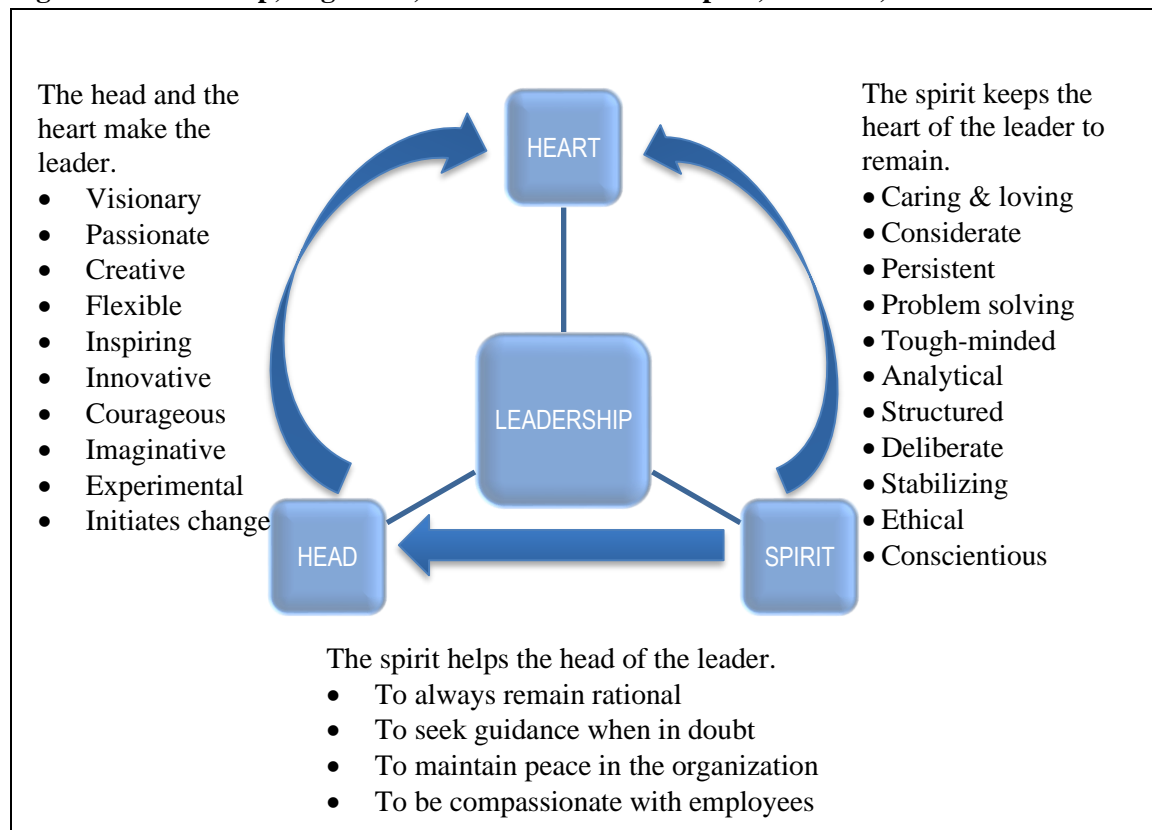
Most traits of influential leaders are less represented in ineffective and toxic leaders in general and toxic education leaders in particular (Christie, 2010; Louw & Beets, 2008). Furthermore, ineffective leaders and their toxic leadership styles do not contribute sufficiently to organizational progress and can detract from organizational goal accomplishment. Similarly, toxic education leaders who discriminate against people based on race, gender, language, religion, and socioeconomic status do not contribute to the progress of all in society. Instead, they cause resentment and resistance (Botha, 2002; Diko, 2014; Naicker & Mestry, 2011). This study rationalizes that effective leadership styles that are admired and accepted are a product of the spirit, the heart, and the head (*Figure 1*), leading to progress of all in society. These leaders embrace rational thinking so that the vision of the organization is achieved. This action requires

courage and inspiring others to join the coalition and take part in achieving the organization's objectives. Toxic education leaders appear to lack these traits.

Hence, the aim of this study was to meticulously observe, understand, and document how toxic education leaders propel their institutions toward destruction. These toxic leaders damage the

culture of learning institutions by violating the employees' legitimate rights, decreasing their morale, commitment, and motivation. The negative outcomes of toxic education leaders cause harm, not only to the immediate employees, but also create lasting and enduring harm to the culture and climate of the learning institutions (Aubrey, 2012).

Figure 1: Leadership, in general, is the function of the spirit, the head, and the heart.



LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the years, leaders in general, and education leaders in particular, have emerged, and their leadership styles have been described. However, there is no single style that can be considered universal. To fill this gap, the leadership theories were examined in a broader context to identify where toxic education leadership aligns. For example, the Great Man theory introduced by Thomas Carlyle (Carlyle, 1840), situation theory (Waller et al., 1989), contingency theory (Battilana & Casciaro, 2012; Strasser, 1983), trait theory (Steyer et al., 1999; Ziegler et al., 2009), participative theory (Russ, 2011; Grasmick et al.,

2012), transactional theory (Aarons, 2006; Odumeru & Ogbonna, 2013) transformational theory (Pitman, 1982; Solomon, 2003), behavioural theory (Amanchukwu et al., 2015), and servant leadership theory (Ebener & O'Connell, 2010; Schwartz & Tumblyn, 2002; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002), were proposed and described. The toxic leadership theory described by Lipman-Blumen (2011) is now examined in the context of education leadership. For more information on the description of different theories and leadership styles, please see Amanchukwu et al., (2015) and Khan et al., (2016), the summary of which is in *Table 1* and *Table 2*.

Table 1: The theories of leadership and what they mean. Where does toxic education leadership align?

The theories of leadership	What the theories mean
The Great Man Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The leader is born as a hero. • The leader is born, not made. • The leader, by nature, possesses leadership traits.
The Trait Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The leader possesses personality traits such as charisma, extroversion, conscientiousness, integrity, and achievement of motivation.
The Contingency Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The leader understands the environment to find a suitable leadership style to do a job. • The theory depends on the fit between leadership qualities and the action styles.
The Situational Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The leader chooses the style of leadership based on the situation that he or she is in. • Different decisions are taken depending on the situation.
The Behavioural Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A person learns and becomes a leader. • The environment influences those who become leaders.
The Participative Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The leader embodies democratic principles. • The leader encourages the heart of every person to achieve the organization's goals.
The Transactional Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is a management theory. • The leader directs the behaviours and actions of the employees under his or her authority. • The leader rewards or punishes the employees based on the outcomes of their behaviours and actions.
The Transformational Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The leader inspires followers to become leaders. • The leader is ethically mature and nurtures good leadership traits in followers. • Leadership trickles down, creating momentum in leading.

Table 2: The leadership styles as observed and described by the teachers and what they mean. Where do the styles of toxic education leaders align?

The styles of leadership	Factors that determine the leadership style
Autocratic style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The leader has complete power and control over the subordinates. • The subordinates have little or no opportunity to make suggestions, even in the institutions' best interests. • Decisions are made quickly and without consultation.
Bureaucratic style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The leader follows the rules and guidelines. • The employees are made to follow the same rules without deviance. • Only valuable for routine duties.
Charismatic style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The leader inspires eagerness in followers to do a job. • The leader uses words that excite the followers, and they become confident and take initiative.
Participative style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The leader is democratic in nature. • The leader involves all participants without fear or favour in making the decision.
Laissez-Faire Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It means let it be. • The leader abdicates responsibility, and he or she avoids making decisions. • Subordinates make decisions on how to work and when to meet the deadlines.
Transactional style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teams' members accept to obey the leader when they accept a job. • Leader rewards the employees in return for effort and compliance.
Transformational style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The leader changes the behaviours of employees and directs their actions to achieve the institution's goals.

It is increasingly becoming evident that leaders, in general, are not born but made, and they can turn out to be exemplary or extremely toxic. It is also accepted that to be a good leader, one must have the experience, knowledge, commitment, patience, and, most importantly, the skills to negotiate and work with other people to achieve the institution's goals (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). Because of this behaviour, leaders are indeed made, not born. Outstanding leaders develop through a process of never-ending self-study, training, education, and accumulation of relevant experiences (Ebener & O'Connell, 2010).

On the contrary, the toxic leaders are the opposite of exemplary leaders. From the onset of their leadership practice, they may display the required qualities of a good leader. But once they get to the top of their leadership practice, they begin to show their destructive and narcissistic leadership characteristics. These people are generally selfish, self-conceited, and self-serving individuals who crush the morale of subordinates (Lipman-Blumen, 2011). All narcissistic leaders are also toxic, and when narcissism becomes an affection, the results of their actions hurt the morale of employees and group effectiveness, which, potentially, can lead to disaster (Aubrey, 2012). The signs of narcissistic leaders, to the detriment of their organization, include being poor listeners, being overly sensitive to criticism, taking advantage of people, especially the weak and the powerless to achieve their personal goals, lacking empathy or disregarding the well-being of other people, having excessive feelings of self-importance and worth, exaggerating achievements and talents, needing constant attention and admiration, reacting to criticism with rage and humiliation, being preoccupied with success and power (Doty & Fenlason, 2013), and on several occasions, legitimizing gossips.

In the last decade, scholars have focused on the actions and behaviours of toxic and destructive leaders in general, and they have provided descriptors for these leaders and the toxicity in their work environments (Lipman-Blumen, 2011; Thoroughgood & Padilla, 2013). However,

research into toxic and destructive education leaders in learning institutions remains in its infancy or just beginning to emerge. Bell (2019) reported that toxic leaders are maladjusted, malcontent, and often malevolent, or even malicious. Extreme positional power and comprehensive control measures characterize their leadership success. It is established that most toxic leaders feel insecure in their roles. Because of that, they develop destructive behaviours, actions, and dysfunctional personal qualities, which generate severe and enduring poisonous effects. The behaviours and actions of these toxic leaders damage the reputation of the institutions (Bell, 2019; Pelletier, 2010).

Toxic education leaders are increasingly becoming prevalent across learning institutions. These leaders affect teachers' thinking, well-being, and commitment, whether in private, religious, or public learning institutions (Vreja et al., 2016). Goldman (2006) reported that toxic education leaders appear to possess personality disorders, which makes them highly toxic and poisonous, leading to a dysfunctional order in the institutions. Toxic leaders, through the negative impact of their decisions and actions, are the main reason for dysfunctional work environments, policies, programs, and employees quitting their professions in the institutions (Başkan, 2020). These toxic education leaders polarize and divide the employees into religious or racial enclaves in the institutions (Heppell, 2011). Yet, regardless of the importance of toxic education leadership, it is, in fact, one of the topics most ignored, and it has become difficult to detect, define, or explain what the toxic education leaders can do in the institutions. It appears that most learning institutions cannot confront or counteract toxic leaders' actions. Unfortunately, the actions of toxic education leaders reduce employee productivity, increase absenteeism and being on sick leave, and lead to weak employee performance due to inadequate commitment and dissatisfaction at work (Vreja et al., 2016). Although it is reported that employees move from one job to another for personal reasons (Krieg, 2006), this may only be a small part of the big

problem: actions of toxic education leaders in learning institutions.

In contrast to toxic leaders, good leaders influence the employees to achieve the institutions' goals. The best and most exemplary education leaders have a vision for their learning institutions. They know what the future of the institutions should look like and share it with all in the institutions (Battilana & Casciaro, 2012). When the employees understand what the institution's future looks like, they can help shape the process, which includes, among others, developing excellent priorities, plans, and procedures pervading the day-to-day life of the institutions (Bhandarker & Rai, 2019). Leadership in this context is, therefore, the ability of leaders to anticipate the future, and through encouraging words and examples, the leaders inspire the whole system by effectively influencing the behaviours, thoughts, and feelings of those working within it and achieve the vision by creating strategic alignments across the whole system (Grasmick et al., 2012). It is, therefore, argued that leadership is a creative enterprise involving all in initiating and innovating. Good and exemplary leaders make good decisions to reach a goal, provide direction, and achieve an objective and a vision to reach a required dream.

Good education leaders get people in the institutions to buy into a shared vision and translate that vision into reality. The leaders motivate the employees by helping them to identify with the tasks and the goals rather than rewarding or punishing them. Good leaders inspire and empower the employees, pull them together rather than push them apart (Peterson & Deal, 1998). Good leaders know how to generate and sustain trust. To do so, they reward employees for innovation and disagreeing with them (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). For leaders to create trust, they must be competent so that others in the organization can rely on their capacity to do the job. To create trust, the leaders must behave with integrity. To generate trust and be effective, leaders must achieve congruency between what they do and say and what their vision is, which

must create meaning. For leaders to be influential, they must tolerate failure and seek ways for improvement.

Good education leaders create meaning by maintaining an environment where employees are reminded of what is essential. The leaders help define the institutions' mission and model the behaviours that will move the institutions towards attaining the mission's goals. Good leaders are people who can eloquently use words to express the collective goals of the institutions and create success. They perceive and handle failure differently. Pitman (1982) mentioned that good leaders embrace failures and vow to learn from them. To create healthy and empowering environments, effective leaders empower the employees to generate commitment and develop the feeling that the members in the organization are learning and competent (Russ, 2011). Good leaders in learning institutions make employees feel that they are at the very heart of the institution, not on the periphery. The leaders create flat and adaptive decentralized systems (Schwartz & Tumblyn, 2002). Strong leadership is often seen in organizations based on a network or flattened hierarchy model (Solomon, 2003).

While excellent and exemplary education leaders provide opportunities for all in the learning institutions, toxic leaders are different. Their symptoms are abusiveness and bullying (Pelletier, 2010), and their disease is the culture, the climate, and the intended outcomes of the culture in the institutions (Fraher, 2016). Culture is the key strategic factor in predicting the behaviours of toxic leaders. Generally, institutions are dynamic systems and flow like a river. Leaders guide people in the right direction in this dynamic environment. Like the river, the culture of the institutions can be contaminated and become stale and toxic, killing all those who drink from its banks. So, leaders and the culture in the institutions are related elements of life in the institutions. As Aubrey (2012) mentioned, the two directly and indirectly influence each other and serve similar functions. As toxic leaders are, the environments become toxic, too. Because of

toxicity, the institutions lose their best employees to external job opportunities, leaving behind below-average instructors. As a result, the institutions may face difficulty attracting applicants for specialized duties (Krieg, 2006).

METHOD OF THE STUDY

This study was carried out over a period of ten years, between 2013 to 2023, in five learning institutions in Western Australia, using ethnographic, social constructivism, and pragmatic approaches. Observational and exploratory methods were used to understand the actions and behaviours of exemplary and toxic education leaders in their learning institutions. Informal conversations were held with teachers to gauge their understanding of leaders' leadership styles, actions, and behaviours in their learning institutions. The teachers were asked the fundamental question: *What are the characteristics of exemplary leaders, and what are the traits associated with toxic education leaders in your learning institution?* Their responses were recorded and collated. As Creswell & Creswell (2018) described, ethnographic and social constructivism were used to understand what teachers perceive about leadership in their natural environments. Similarly, the pragmatic approach was used because it does not commit the researcher to one system of philosophy and reality.

Leading to the study, several textbooks on leadership were explored and studied to understand the traits, actions, and behaviours that are associated with exemplary and toxic leaders. Furthermore, articles that report on theories of leadership and what they mean (*Table 1*) were identified using the Google search engine. The styles of leadership as observed were recorded (*Table 2*). Words that described the behaviours and actions of toxic education leaders (*Table 3*), as described by teachers in the learning institutions, were recorded. These words included narcissism, authoritarianism, unpredictability, manipulation, unethical conduct, hypocrisy, sabotage, abusive and bullying behaviour, and self-promoting attitudes. These words were then

used to retrieve more articles on toxic leadership in databases such as Elsevier, Taylor & Francis Online, ERIC, SAGE, Google Scholar, and other online databases. A total of 120 full-text articles were retrieved, reviewed, and analysed. The articles that did not comprehensively describe exemplary and/or toxic education leaders were excluded.

THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY

A comprehensive description of toxic education leadership has been presented, and the key descriptors of these leaders in the learning institutions are provided (*Table 3*). The descriptors include abusiveness, promoting inequality, indecisiveness, divisiveness, lack of integrity, and authoritarian attitudes. These actions and behaviours of toxic education leaders are debilitating to the employees and the work environments. These behaviours have led most teaching and non-teaching staff to quit or anticipate quitting their professions. The factors that are prevalent across toxic education leaders and their explanations are provided in *Table 4*. A teacher from a school elaborated on his experience of toxic education leaders in his school as shown below. For purposes of privacy, the names of the toxic leader and the school have been concealed.

Judas the Iscariot, a model of toxic education leaders

Judas the Iscariot is the Head of Science and Curriculum at The Golgotha High School. He had spent considerable time in education and worked his way up to leadership. In his mind, no teachers out there knew things better than him. The Iscariot was instrumental for teachers leaving his learning institution for decades, and he appeared to find joy when they left. In the process, he helped shape the direction of The Golgotha High School. Unfortunately, the direction that he wanted the school to take was enough to repulse any rational teacher who came into contact with it. While at the School, Iscariot wrote nearly everything you can think of in every learning area, including religion. He had written revolting teaching programs as though they were for the oppressed and

assessment types that are only understood by him, not considering the leaps in education. These items became the gold standard at the school, and any change in the program or the assessment items was considered a violation of good teaching practice. Iscariot always said, “*We do not do these things here*”. In fact, by using the phrase, the Iscariot had excluded the teachers from being part of the school or taking initiative.

While the School had progressed over the years, the governance and leadership systems had deteriorated. The Iscariot himself was stuck in his past. His ego had terminated his outlook for opportunities to improve himself and change. The assessment items were repeated each time or year. To make it miserably worse and revolting, most students whose siblings went through the school had the assessment items and their answer keys. The students also knew that these assessment items were repeated each year. Every time the students sat tests or exams, if there were slight changes in the questions, they would complain that they did not learn the concept tested. Parents began to mount pressure on teachers, who had to constantly explain themselves to the parents about their teaching and assessment processes. It was taking a toll on the teachers.

Because of what Judas the Iscariot had done in the past, he had remained stuck in that past. He saw anything new as a threat to his leadership. The staff turnover in the school increased, but that did

not come as a surprise. In fact, there were unethical accusations of teachers to leadership, even on minuscule and insignificant issues. As though these accusations were not enough, Iscariot created a clique, and using that clique, bullying of other staff started. Most staff were assigned to teach irrelevant courses, which in most cases were outside their area of expertise. Teachers began to leave the school. Some left the school in the middle of the year. Sick leave increased. With the teachers leaving the school, it became obvious that the students were the victims. Academic standards began to fall, and students began to fail their external examinations in each subject. Students who had the means left the school.

The students' behaviour in the classroom deteriorated, and teaching became extremely hard and unbearable for everyone. There was no more justice, and communication between leadership and staff deteriorated. Most teachers felt left out and did not know what was happening in the school. There were many guesses and speculations, which amounted to rumours circulating in the school and the community. Teachers began to form groups, and those who did not belong, based on race or religion, became lonely. The school became a hell, and proverbially, everyone was on fire, including Judas the Iscariot.

Table 3: The traits of toxic education leadership and the consequences of their toxicity.

Characteristics of Toxic Education Leaders	Explanation of the characteristics of the toxic education leaders in the institutions
Tyranny and unpredictability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The tendency to lord one’s power over employees. • This leads to workplace deviance by subordinates. • The subordinates must do whatever they are told without questions.
Abusive, sabotage, and unethical conducts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviour aims to cause stress and distress to the targeted individuals so that they relinquish their duties or positions. • The leaders avoid meeting with subordinates to discuss essential issues in institutions.
Destructive leadership style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The leaders show systematic and repeated behaviours that violate the legitimate interest of the employees and the organizational goals, tasks, resources, and effectiveness or motivation, well-being, or job satisfaction of the subordinates. • The leaders encourage social exclusion of individuals, which may be based on race, gender, language, or religion.
Workplace dishonesty and bullying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persistent negative behaviour, and harassment, perpetrated by one or more individuals on a less powerful target who is often unable to defend himself or herself. • The leaders organize meetings with subordinates for even the smallest issues and reprimand them harshly. • The leaders force teaching staff to resign from teaching or move to new learning institutions.
Fraudulence and deception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education leaders are engaged in lying about anything. • The actions are intended to make them be seen as the organization's most important people.
Distorting and suppressing facts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The leaders do not tell the truth about any activity, creating a lack of trust in the learning institutions. • The leaders send unfounded messages about subordinates to other senior leaders to create mistrust of the subordinates.
Compete with perceived challenger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The leaders are constantly afraid, thinking that their positions are in jeopardy. • The leaders report lies about subordinates to eliminate them from their duties. • The leaders’ problem-solving processes are driven by fear.
Yells, ridicules, threatens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The leaders use these methods to control the actions of the subordinates and make them feel that they are worthless.
Mental torture, harassment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The leaders use these techniques to stress the subordinates so that they quit their jobs, aiming for the leaders to remain in their positions of power and authority. • The leaders accuse subordinates of not providing adequate instructions during teaching.

Table 4: The prevalent factors in toxic education leaders and what these factors mean.

The factors prevalent in toxic education leaders	What these factors mean to the subordinates and employees in the learning institutions
Egocentrism, rigid and self-promoting attitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The leaders think that they are perfect and the best. • The leaders do not listen to ideas provided by employees. • The leaders make decisions without consultation. • The leaders think that they are more talented than the other managers. • The leaders put their failures on the shoulders of subordinates.
Negative mood and unpredictability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The employees cannot come close to the leaders when angry, dispirited, and furious. • The leaders are rude and offending to the subordinates. • The leaders have sudden bursts of anger, short temper, and impulsive behaviours. • The leaders' actions are unfair and inconsistent across the organization. They favour some employees.
Unappreciation and narcissism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The leaders do not care about the well-being of their personnel. • The leaders are arrogant and demonstrate superiority in their actions. • The leaders allusively and constantly remind their personnel of previous mistakes and faults. • The leaders constantly and disturbingly say that their personnel fail in their work.
Instability, uncertainty, and abusive attitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The leaders do not act as colleagues but as bosses. • The leaders make the personnel behave according to their mood. • The mood of the leaders determines the work climate and aura. If the leaders are angry, there is tension in the workplace; if they are happy, there is a positive aura.
Authoritarian and hypocrisy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The leaders generally talk about subjects that they give importance to. • The leaders do not support the subjects that the subordinates suggest. • The words of the leaders are inconsistent with deeds. • The leaders run the operations with their own decisions rather than the common decisions that benefit all. • The leaders are critical and do not consider the subordinate's opinion, which contrasts with their ideas. • The leaders tolerate the actions and behaviour of the people they like in what is generally intolerable if committed by another employee.
Lack of confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The leaders are not confident with their knowledge and work. • The leaders fear the subordinates, and they begin to create lies about them. • The leaders promote social inequality in the institutions. • The leaders exclude subordinates from communication and contact.

DISCUSSION

An ideal learning institution that attracts and retains teachers is a place that provides teachers with an environment where their personal and professional well-being are supported. This is a learning environment where teachers have the confidence to make decisions, express their creativity, and move through their professional journey with ease. In this environment, teachers have a clear sense of support and feel that their professional journey is not in jeopardy or under threat. Physically and psychologically, this is an environment where teachers feel confident and comfortable to share how they feel and what they think. It is a place where everyone's unique perspectives are cherished, celebrated, and fostered so that each person develops a sense of belonging. In an ideal learning institution, personal and professional boundaries are respected (Battilana & Casciaro, 2012). Have toxic education leaders provided these ideal conditions to their teachers in the learning institutions? The present study has identified that toxic education leaders are content with the status quo. These toxic education leaders are extremely destructive to the detriment of students and the learning institutions. These toxic education leaders are the reason for the teacher shortages in the learning institutions.

An ideal learning institution is a place where teachers have a feeling of financial safety and job security. In these learning institutions, teachers engage in meaningful and purposeful work. They also work in cohesive and collaborative teams. Teachers are recognized for their talents, efforts, and contribution in an ideal learning institution. Unfortunately, toxic education leaders have significantly contributed to teachers feeling unsafe, undervalued, unrecognized, insecure, afraid, lonely, and unconfident in their actions (Aubrey, 2012). This study reports that toxic education leaders have created an environment that does not support conducive working conditions because their leadership capabilities are stuck in a juvenile stage of leadership development. These toxic leaders are, in fact,

incapable of achieving moral goodness, and therefore, they continue to undermine the ideal human conditions. Their negative actions and behaviours always destroy solidarity and trust in learning institutions. Because of their extreme collective ignorance, personal fear, and lust for power, toxic education leaders have impaired leadership capabilities. Therefore, they can't operate in a fully human way.

In the present study, it has been identified that toxic education leaders come in different forms, ranging from those leaders who are clueless and cause minor harm to those who are overtly evil, causing harrowing pain, which inflicts serious damage to the mental well-being of teachers. It was also observed that most toxic education leaders lacked the necessary skills and working knowledge to lead or mentor new teachers. Many of these toxic leaders have ascended to leadership positions not because they have the knowledge and skills to do the job but because of the length of time that they have spent in the learning institutions and the support they receive from their immediate proxies. Sadly, to the detriment of the learning institutions, they create an environment of fear and mistrust to cement their perversive authority.

From the teacher's perspective, as narrated in the results, it appears that toxic education leaders' negative actions and behaviours are on a continuum, ranging from those toxic leaders who are ineffective and incompetent to those who are unethical and evil. In the middle of the continuum, toxic leaders are obsessed with power and authority. With the illegitimate authority, they increase management approval levels for even the smallest of administrative actions. As reported by Başkan (2020), the objective of their actions is to increase employee micromanagement. The micromanagement of staff shows that the leaders do not have the nature of good in themselves. Therefore, they misuse their authority, aiming to exploit weak systems and manipulate and coerce the employees to act in ways that celebrate the leader. As Mehta & Maheshwari (2013) identified, this is a behaviour that promotes self-

interests. At the other end of the continuum, toxic leaders display the highest level of ineffective and negative behaviours with disastrous consequences on the well-being of employees, the learning institutions, and the people who encounter them.

Surprisingly, based on the findings in this study, toxic education leaders emerge from a collective rather than individualistic environments. This observation has support in the literature, which indicates that the collectivist environment is often self-regulated by the imposed social rules that put the organizations' perceived needs above individual concerns (Başkan, 2020). Therefore, toxic education leaders thrive on destructive behaviours that harm the learning institutions and the teaching staff, many of whom are forced to relinquish their careers or permanently move to different learning institutions. With toxic leaders in learning institutions, enthusiasm, creativity, autonomy, and innovativeness of the teaching staff are curtailed, and the interests of toxic leaders become the most important. As Mehta & Maheshwari (2013) reported, this kind of destructive leadership behaviour has emerged as a silent killer, and it tends to position the leaders to hurt and eliminate the subordinates who question their authority and decisions.

The present study further shows that toxic education leaders are not interested in mentoring subordinates in the learning institutions. As shown in *Tables 3 and 4*, the characteristics, behaviours, and actions of toxic education leaders are completely different from those of exemplary leaders. Moreover, these toxic leaders torture, undermine, demean, marginalize, intimidate, demoralize, demonize, disenfranchise, incapacitate, terrorize, and corrupt the work environments of the subordinates. These actions and behaviours have also been reported in the work of Pelletier (2010). Several dimensions characterize toxic education leaders based on these actions and behaviours. These dimensions define their narcissistic character, and they include abusive supervision, authoritarian behaviour, self-promoting attitude, undermining

the knowledge and abilities of colleagues, incivility, and being unpredictable.

The abusive supervision, authoritarian attitudes, and undermining of the abilities of colleagues have the support in literature (Bell, 2019; Goldman, 2006; Lipman-Blumen, 2011). Self-promotion and unpredictability behaviours emerged from observing what these education leaders do in the learning institutions. Research has also shown that toxic leaders lack concern for the welfare and well-being of employees, a personality trait that negatively impacts organizational culture. Furthermore, it is reported that most subordinates feel that the actions of toxic education leaders are driven primarily by selfish motives and self-interest (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013).

In the learning institutions where the observational studies were carried out, an abusive supervision was a sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviours. As Bell (2019) reported, abusive behaviour describes authoritarian education leaders who exert absolute authority and total control over employees, including the requirement for unqualified obedience. Their narcissistic personality traits include actions or behaviours that demonstrate arrogance, entitlement, grandiosity, self-absorption, and hostility because of their fragile self-esteem (Battilana & Casciaro, 2012). It is reported that unpredictability of toxic education leaders is an erratic negative behaviour that magnifies negative results (Doty & Fenlason, 2013), and self-promotion behaviour is intended to promote their personal interests or agendas instead of focusing on the interests of the learning institutions. These actions are designed to produce a positive image that appears to ascend the institutional ranks and capture higher-level leaders' attention. Therefore, toxic education leadership is an approach that creates an environment where employees are rewarded for agreeing with the leaders and are reprimanded for challenging the actions of the leaders (Bell, 2019). In this process, three elements are necessary for the actions of toxic education leaders to be

debilitating, as shown in *Table 5*. These elements are the toxic education leaders, a conducive environment that supports the toxic leaders to succeed in their personal agenda, and the susceptible subordinates who are either conformers or colluders, forming a toxic triangle (Padilla et al., 2007). In the triangle, the toxic education leaders have the ideology of hatred.

Based on the observations of actions and behaviours of toxic education leaders as reported by employees, toxic education leaders are poisonous, lethal, and otherwise quite harmful to

the well-being of teachers. Since the toxic behaviours and actions of these leaders are lethal, it is essential to understand them well because their toxic styles are pervasive in learning institutions. In a study conducted by Goldman (2006), the participants in the study claimed that they had worked with toxic leaders at some point in their professional careers, but they were afraid to confront them. Unfortunately, the overall paucity of systematic research into the actions and behaviours of toxic education leaders is surprising, considering the apparent widespread nature of toxic education leaders.

Table 5: Three elements of toxic and destructive leadership behaviours in the toxic triangle

The domain in the toxic triangle	Explanation of the behaviour
Toxic and destructive leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dismissing concerns of subordinates. • Spreading misinformation about subordinates. • Avoiding listening to the concerns of subordinates. • Feel content with the status quo and refuse to change or improve.
Conducive environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The leaders encourage toxic behaviours to increase. • The learning environments are saturated with hatred. • There is a rise in those who belong and those who do not. • There is a rise in those who are entitled and those who are not. • Gossip and lies are legitimized.
Susceptible followers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subordinates conform to the toxic behaviours of the leaders. • Subordinates collude with toxic leaders. • Subordinates are divided into enclaves based on race, language, or religion.

The present study shows severe consequences of toxic education leaders on employees and learning institutions. It indicates that abusive supervision causes various institutional deviant behaviours, which include intentional decrease in productivity levels by employees (Christie, 2010; Diko, 2014). In fact, teachers repay the actions and behaviours of toxic education leaders with slow productivity or lack of cooperation. They refuse to put their hands up for any voluntary work. The study also shows that abusive supervision causes emotional exhaustion in employees, and this finding was echoed in the report of Heppell (2011). Emotional exhaustion is the employee's purposeful withholding of new ideas or serious concerns about issues in the learning institutions. In the five learning institutions where the study was carried out, teachers held back their physical and mental

efforts as a response to toxic leadership behaviour. Similarly, self-promotion attitude negatively affects teachers' active engagement, and they only become passively involved in activities.

Authoritarian education leaders' behaviours and actions negatively affect teachers' creativity. Since creative thinking is a mental effort, toxic education leaders negatively impact teachers' physical and mental efforts. The leaders may experience increased rebellious tendencies or a greater intent to challenge the leaders (Slutsky et al., 2005). Toxic education leaders negatively impact individuals and groups on various levels, including job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and organizational trust. Because of their toxic actions, these leaders are a liability to the learning institutions. They cause intentional decreases in productivity levels, emotional

exhaustion of employees, decreased level of active engagement, decreased level of creativity, increased rebellious tendencies, and decreased job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and organizational trust (Vreja et al., 2016).

Toxic education leaders always reprimand teachers without providing an appropriate action for the teachers to take. They tell the teachers that their actions to solve an issue were not appropriate without divulging the correct action to take (Waller et al., 1989). Toxic leaders put a heavy burden on teachers. They control them and demand unquestionable obedience (Yavas, 2016). These toxic leaders are narcissistic, a personality trait that encompasses grandiosity, arrogance, self-absorption, entitlement, fragile self-esteem, and hostility (Doty & Fenlason, 2013). They have elevated sense of personal worth and vain admiration but only work to bring glory to themselves.

Toxic education leaders are unpredictable and unreliable, keeping subordinates from successfully predicting how they act in any scenario (Bell, 2019). This negative behaviour has negative effects on employees. Their unpredictable negative behaviours exacerbate negative results, which include teachers anticipating quitting their profession or moving to new institutions. This action means toxic education leaders are neither reliable nor dependable (Aubrey, 2012). Unpredictability and self-promoting attitudes promote self-interests above and beyond the interests of the units they lead and demoralize the teachers. These actions are usually done to maintain a positive image to the upper level of the leadership hierarchy (Bell, 2019), and to parade their good deeds (Bhandarker & Rai, 2019).

Despite the prevalence of toxic education leaders across learning institutions and the growing negative effects of their destructive actions and behaviours, there are issues associated with the literature. One, there is a lack of a unified definition of toxic education leadership with clear boundaries. The boundaries should clarify the constructs to distinguish toxic education leaders

from destructive and narcissistic leaders. Two, the constructs that describe toxic leaders are also used to describe other types of destructive leaders. For example, abusive supervision, tyranny, and bullying are used to describe all types of toxic and destructive leadership. Third, there is a lack of unified theoretical framework based on a shared understanding of what toxic education leadership is and is not. Fourth, there is not enough literature dedicated to understanding toxic education leadership. These issues reinforce each other and, therefore, compound efficient scientific communication and accumulation of knowledge of what underlies toxic education leadership in the learning institutions.

However, regardless of the inconsistencies in identifying the correct constructs that define toxic education leaders and the lack of literature to argue the known effects of toxic education leadership, the present study has undoubtedly highlighted key constructs associated with these leaders. It is hoped that the study will stimulate more research into toxic education leaders so that a better understanding of these leaders can be accomplished. These toxic leaders have influenced teaching, learning, and leading in education for many generations.

CONCLUSION

The present study has brought to light the actions and behaviours of toxic education leaders. These actions damage the culture and settings of the learning institutions. The toxicity arises because of perceived threat to the leaders' status and power. Consequently, the leaders begin to violate the legitimate rights and interests of teachers, submerging them into a culture of silence. In the process, they decrease the commitment and motivation of teachers, conditioning them to be present but not visible or visible but not present, and resulting to an asymmetry of thoughts, culture, and language. The toxic culture causes tension, contradiction, fear, and doubt in the institutions, and ultimately, the teachers are forced to relinquish their professions. The negative conducts of toxic leaders create a lasting harm to the culture and climate of the institutions and the

people involved. Toxic education leaders participate in academic dishonesty, hypocrisy, sabotage, manipulation, fraudulence, unethical conducts, bullying, threatening, destruction, and disruption because they lack the necessary knowledge and confidence to lead. These behaviours make the leaders fight for power to cement their authority.

Given that there is limited literature on the actions and behaviour of toxic education leaders in the learning institutions, the study has, for the first time, provided a new direction in the understanding of toxic leadership in the learning institutions. However, more work needs to be done to fully understand the degree to which these toxic leaders continue to cause a harrowing pain to teachers. Furthermore, the ability of the learning institutions to respond to or take measures to control the actions of toxic education leaders may directly or indirectly impact on the degree of harm that the toxic leaders can do. It is envisioned that as the number of toxic education leaders increases in the learning institutions, the number of teachers committed to teaching will decline, and those in the profession will anticipate quitting permanently, leaving behind below average teachers. Therefore, there is an urgent need for reforms in education leadership and education sector. It is recommended that education leaders embrace diversity for the good of all in the learning institutions. This action may bring about education stability.

DISCLOSURE

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