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Toxic Professional Relationship in Academic Settings: A Personal Reflection and Pedagogical Implication

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Abstract: Toxic professional relationships—characterized by subtle exclusion, politicized decision-making, and emotional suppression—are a prevalent yet underexamined concern in academic institutions. This research emphasizes the psychological, pedagogical, and emotional repercussions for educators in situations characterized by workplace conflict, in contrast to prior studies that primarily examine structural factors. The study seeks to examine how educators perceive, interpret, and react to toxic dynamics, especially via reflective processes. We gathered data from three years of anonymized reflective journaling employing a qualitative, narrative-reflective methodology and conducted a theme analysis. Research highlights three main themes: the emotional effort needed to maintain professionalism despite feeling excluded, changes in teaching methods as a way to resist and find meaning, and how reflective practice helps teachers stay true to their teaching values. The analysis further demonstrates how gender and early-career status exacerbate susceptibility to toxic dynamics. The study prioritizes ethical contemplation as a transforming practice and a means of action instead of providing prescriptive solutions. Institutions should implement emotional intelligence training, equitable task allocation, and peer support mechanisms to cultivate more equal academic settings. This research advocates for a work culture founded on explicit performance expectations, mutual respect, compassion, and integrity in education, facilitating a deeper comprehension of teachers' authentic experiences in challenging school environments.

Keywords: toxic workplace, academic culture, reflective practice, emotional labor, pedagogical resilience

Abstrak: Hubungan profesional yang beracun—ditandai dengan pengecualian halus, pengambilan keputusan yang dipolitisasi, dan penekanan emosional—merupakan masalah yang umum namun kurang diteliti di institusi akademik.Penelitian ini menekankan dampak psikologis, pedagogis, dan emosional bagi pendidik dalam situasi yang ditandai oleh konflik di tempat kerja, berbeda dengan studi sebelumnya yang terutama meneliti faktor struktural.Studi ini bertujuan untuk meneliti bagaimana pendidik memandang, menafsirkan, dan bereaksi terhadap dinamika beracun, terutama melalui proses reflektif.Kami mengumpulkan data dari tiga tahun jurnal reflektif anonim menggunakan metodologi naratif-reflektif kualitatif dan melakukan analisis tema.Penelitian menyoroti tiga tema utama: upaya emosional yang diperlukan untuk mempertahankan profesionalisme meskipun merasa terpinggirkan, perubahan dalam metode pengajaran sebagai cara untuk melawan dan menemukan makna, serta bagaimana praktik reflektif membantu guru tetap setia pada nilai-nilai pengajaran mereka.Analisis lebih lanjut menunjukkan bagaimana gender dan status karir awal memperburuk kerentanan terhadap dinamika beracun.Studi ini memprioritaskan kontemplasi etis sebagai praktik transformasi dan sarana tindakan daripada memberikan solusi preskriptif.Institusi harus menerapkan pelatihan kecerdasan emosional, alokasi tugas yang adil, dan mekanisme dukungan sejawat untuk membudayakan lingkungan akademik

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yang lebih setara.Penelitian ini mendorong budaya kerja yang didasarkan pada ekspektasi kinerja yang jelas, saling menghormati, belas kasih, dan integritas dalam pendidikan, yang memfasilitasi pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang pengalaman autentik pendidik di lingkungan kampus yang menantang.

Kata kunci: tempat kerja beracun, budaya akademik, praktik reflektif, kerja emosional, ketahanan pedagogis

1. Introduction

Toxicity in professional relationships—evidenced by exclusion, covert bullying, or politicized decisions—is a prevalent issue in academic institutions that frequently remains unrecognized or unaddressed [1]. This study examines the interpersonal dynamics of professional toxicity encountered by a faculty member in an Indonesian higher education institution after a merit-based recruitment process. This study highlights the often unnoticed experiences of feeling excluded that affect emotional health and teaching involvement, instead of just focusing on problems within the system or structure.

Previous research has mostly looked at workplace toxicity by focusing on the organization or structure, highlighting issues like power differences, poor policies, and ineffective management [2] [3]. Although these frameworks are helpful in comprehending overarching mechanisms, they often neglect the personal, subjective experiences of individual educators. On the other hand, reflective narrative methods—though not often used—offer a strong way to examine the personal, emotional, and ethical parts of professional life, especially in non-Western academic environments where cultural rules about hierarchy, harmony, and indirect communication can hide harmful behaviors. Although these methods possess limits concerning subjectivity and generalizability, they are adept at obtaining nuanced, contextually relevant insights that are often overlooked in more detached approaches.

This paper investigates how toxic professional interactions, frequently overlooked in formal institutional discussions, might undermine a faculty member's sense of belonging, agency, and success in the classroom. The proposed solution entails utilizing a qualitative, reflective-narrative investigation. We gathered data over three academic years via personal reflective journaling and thematically evaluated it to discern reoccurring emotional and instructional themes.

This article presents multiple significant contributions. Initially, it presents reflective narrative inquiry as a meticulous and contextually attuned analytical framework for investigating professional toxicity. Secondly, it enhances the marginalized dialogue around toxic interpersonal dynamics within Southeast Asian academic settings. Third, it broadens [4] Scon notions of reflective practice by illustrating how hardship can work as a catalyst for pedagogical resilience and ethical self-development.

We structure the subsequent sections of this work as follows: The following parts of this work are organized like this: Section Two explains the theoretical framework and research methods; Section Three highlights the main findings from the analysis of reflective journals; Section Four looks at the teaching and emotional effects of the lived experience; and Section Five offers conclusions and practical suggestions for creating healthier, more caring academic environments.

2. Literature Review

Toxicity within Academic Institutions

Workplace toxicity has been extensively studied in organizational and psychological literature. Toxic behaviors in academic settings frequently manifest in subtle ways, including exclusion from collaboration, knowledge hoarding, or decisions driven by political motives [5]. As discussed in Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, and Cooper [6] characterize workplace bullying as a consistent pattern of adverse behaviors—such as humiliation, manipulation, and social exclusion—that result in psychological damage and diminished professional efficacy. Even though some schools have ways to handle formal complaints, harmful behavior often continues, hidden behind a facade of friendliness or buried within strict power structures, especially in cultures that value harmony and respect for authority.

Institutional Frameworks and Their Function in Facilitating Toxicity

Numerous studies have identified structural and systemic factors that contribute to toxic academic settings. As emphasized in [7] and [8] that ambiguous governance models, inadequate leadership training, and intensely competitive promotion processes may unintentionally foster exclusionary and politicized practices. Although these studies provide significant insights into organizational dysfunction, they primarily emphasize institutional reform at the macro level, frequently overlooking the micro-level emotional and relational experiences of individuals within these systems.

Emotional and Educational Implications for Educators

The effects of hazardous surroundings on educators have been inadequately examined, especially using qualitative and narrative approaches. For instance Bellas [9] and Darabi [10] assert that toxic interactions may result in emotional weariness, identity fragmentation, and a reduced feeling of purpose in teaching. Nevertheless, limited research has explored personal narratives to comprehend how educators assimilate and address these professional problems. First-person reflective perspectives are particularly insightful in demonstrating how toxicity affects classroom presence, instructional methodology, and interpersonal trust.

Reflective Practice as a Means of Resilience and Development

Reflective practice, as defined by Schön [11] and further developed by Brookfield [12], is a transforming process wherein professionals interpret difficult or emotionally intense situations. In education, reflection transcends personal introspection; it serves as a mechanism for pedagogical reimagining and ethical self-development. Although the significance of reflection in pedagogical advancement is generally recognized, its relevance to encounters with professional toxicity is still constrained. Empirical data remains scarce regarding how harmful events might result in positive transformation, particularly when examined through systematic reflection.

The Southeast Asian Context: Taciturnity and Delicacy

Traditional norms that emphasize social harmony and indirect communication exacerbate the problem of toxicity in academic interactions in Southeast Asia, especially in Indonesia. Current research in the region has predominantly focused on curriculum innovation, accreditation procedures, and student outcomes [13], whereas matters concerning faculty interpersonal dynamics have garnered scant academic scrutiny. This exclusion may indicate institutional sensitivity and a general hesitance to publicly question professional culture.

Contextualizing the Present Research

This study addresses significant gaps by positioning itself at the convergence of personal narrative, institutional critique, and educational reflection. This essay illustrates how narrative and reflective techniques might reveal the frequently overlooked effects of toxicity by utilizing a faculty member's personal experience of professional marginalization. Significantly, it illustrates how emotional adversity—when ethically contemplated—can transform into a potent source of educational insight and professional dedication. This paper contributes to the developing debate on reflective academic practice and provides a culturally contextualized perspective on toxic professional relationships in non-Western academic settings.

Theoretical Framework

This research is based on the notion of reflective practice, namely as articulated by Donald Schön and further elaborated by Stephen Brookfield. Reflective practice asserts that professionals acquire knowledge most efficiently not alone through direct experience, but also by undertaking critical self-analysis of their behaviors, emotions, and conclusions. Schön presents the notion of the *"reflective practitioner"*—an individual who persistently interrogates and analyzes their activity amidst doubt or discomfort. His framework distinguishes between *reflection-in-action* (contemplation during execution) and *reflection-on-action* (contemplation post-execution), both of which are essential to transformative learning.

Brookfield explains this idea more clearly by highlighting critical reflection, which involves recognizing assumptions, understanding power dynamics, and considering different perspectives. In academic settings, this means that teachers facing unfair treatment or negative interactions may either take the experience to heart in a harmful way or rethink it critically to develop new teaching ideas. In academic environments, the evidence indicates that educators encountering institutional marginalization or interpersonal toxicity may either internalize the experience adversely or critically reinterpret it to generate fresh instructional insights. Reflection transforms from a conventional coping strategy into a means of reclaiming autonomy and reconstructing professional meaning.

This study utilizes emotional labor theory, specifically regarding teaching as an affective practice [14] [15]. Teaching necessitates the regulation and articulation of emotions to facilitate student learning, even within the educator's own emotional turmoil. Educators operating in toxic circumstances frequently engage in concealed emotional labor to sustain their composure, drive, and ethical integrity in the classroom. This emotional work, albeit taxing, can also serve as a catalyst for self-awareness and professional growth when analyzed through reflective inquiry.

This article conceptualizes professional toxicity not merely as an issue to be revealed, but also as a potential locus for transformation through the integration of these ideologies. The theoretical framework directs the investigation of personal narratives, enabling the interpretation of emotional experiences through academic perspectives that emphasize growth, resilience, and ethical development. Furthermore, these theories are especially pertinent in the Southeast Asian context, where indirect communication and institutional silence frequently obscure the emotional aspects of professional life.

3. Methodology

This study used a narrative-reflective inquiry approach to examine the emotional and pedagogical consequences of professional marginalization in academic environments. This
qualitative approach is especially effective for analyzing personal experiences across time, facilitating introspection, critical analysis, and theory-guided reflection [16] [17].

Overview of Research Design
The study adheres to a systematic progression comprising five essential phases:
1. Narrative Data Acquisition (Reflective Journaling)
2. Compilation of Documents (Supplementary Materials)
3. Thematic Narrative Analysis 4. Interpretation via Theoretical Framework
5. Ethical Contemplation and Depiction

Each phase is delineated below, accompanied by a flowchart to illustrate the procedure.

The Systematic Methodological Approach

Step 1: Narrative Data Collection

The principal data comprises personal **reflective journals** authored throughout a three-year academic span (2021–2024). These notebooks documented immediate comments on professional experiences, emotional reactions, classroom interactions, and institutional engagements—especially following significant instances of tension or exclusion.

Step 2: Compilation of Documents

We assembled supplementary documents, such as casual observational records, to triangulate the personal narrative and contextualize institutional dynamics.
- Casual **observational records**
- Chosen **email communication**
- Organizational documents (e.g., agendas, memoranda, assessment forms)

These materials were utilized not as primary data but to substantiate the interpretation and authenticate the timeframe and institutional setting of the narrative.

Step 3: Thematic Narrative Analysis

Employing [18] six-step thematic analysis framework, the reflective journals were systematically coded and categorized into themes:
- Suppression and Marginalization
- Emotional Labor - Pedagogical Reframing - Identity Reconstruction

The analysis concentrated on temporal and situational patterns of meaning, emphasizing pivotal moments and emotional transitions.

Step 4: Analysis Using the Theoretical Framework

Themes were analyzed via the lens of Reflective Practice Theory (Schön, 1983; Brookfield, 1995).
- Emotional Labor Theory [19] [20]

This phase highlighted the significance of personal meaning-making as a cornerstone for resilience, transformation, and pedagogical clarity.

Step 5: Ethical Contemplation and Depiction

The study's autoethnographic approach consistently incorporated ethical reflection. We safeguarded the identities of individuals, placing emphasis on systemic trends rather than specific allegations. To depict the experience authentically, without sacrificing professional integrity.

Flowchart of the Research Methodology

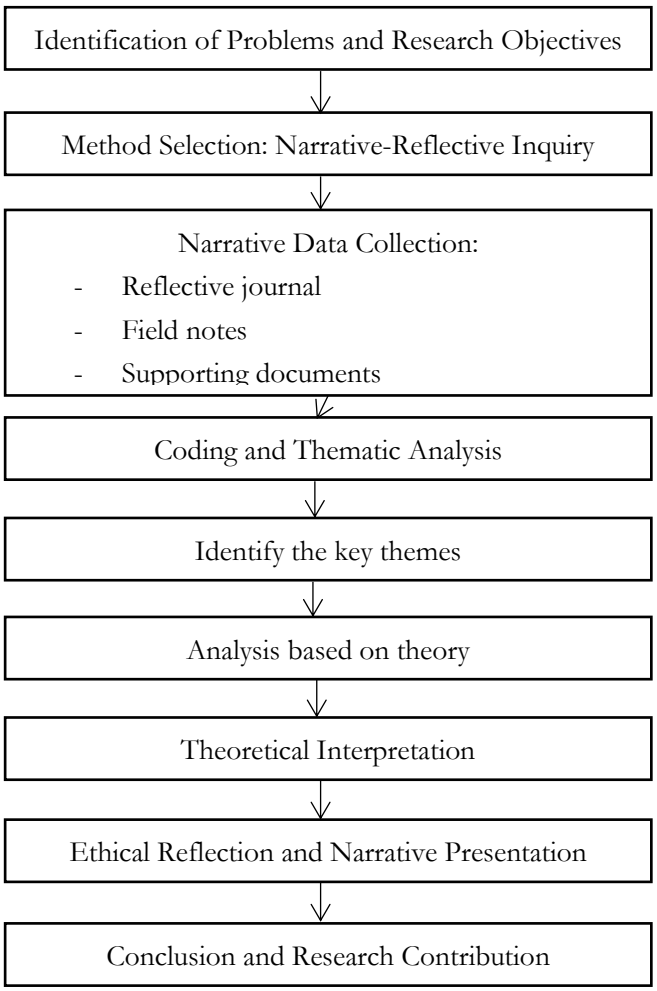

Chart 1: Flowchart of the Research Methodology

Ethical Considerations in Research

We carried out the research with complete consideration of the ethical issues related to personal narratives in institutional contexts. No identifiable info The research reveals information about third parties. Instead of assigning blame, the research aims to comprehend and recontextualize experience as a resource for professional and instructional advancement.

4. Findings and Analysis

Findings

The analysis of reflective views found three main themes: (1) subtle feelings of being alone and not being recognized in their job, (2) emotional effects and ways to cope, and (3) growth in teaching through resilience. Each topic demonstrates how relational toxicity, although frequently informal and implicit, can profoundly impact an educator's feeling of agency and purpose within the academic setting.

Nuanced Exclusion and Occupational Invisibility

Toxic professional relationships in academia typically appear as subtle patterns of exclusion rather than overt conflict or confrontation. The term encompasses exclusion from significant collaborations, restricted access to institutional resources, or a progressive decline in collegial support. These processes, albeit challenging to substantiate formally, engender a perception of professional invisibility that diminishes both contributions and self-assurance. [21]) observes that academic toxicity is frequently "quiet and polite," yet profoundly harmful. This type of exclusion frequently connects with changes in informal power relations, especially after acknowledgment, advancements, or achievements in meritocratic selection systems. Despite the institution's esteem for these achievements, they may inadvertently trigger professional jealousy or rivalry among colleagues [22]. The result is an implicit marginalization that functions beyond official frameworksframeworks antly impacts everyday professional existence.

Affective Consequences and Coping Mechanisms

The emotional repercussions of such exclusion encompass self-doubt, stress, and reduced drive. Nevertheless, the reflective data indicate that coping strategies typically progress over time, transitioning from perplexity and distress to deliberate emotional regulation and boundary establishment.

Instead of retaliating or fully withdrawing, some instructors opt to concentrate on aspects under their control: fostering meaningful relationships with students, participating in academic pursuits, or finding peer support beyond the immediate toxic setting. These reactions correspond with notions of emotional labor in academia Bellas and illustrate how emotional resilience serves as a survival strategy.

Educational Transformation via Resilience

A notable discovery of this study is that interpersonal adversity might act as a catalyst for educational profundity. The experience of marginalization prompted several instructors to pursue authenticity in the classroom, utilizing teaching not merely as an obligation, but also as a sanctuary and a means of rejuvenation. This transition embodies Brookfield's concept that teaching can serve as a means of resistance, wherein personal ideals are reaffirmed and actualized.

By channeling energy into the student-teacher connection and prioritizing learner development, educators restore their professional identity through the act of teaching. Thus, resilience transforms into a pedagogical concept—not solely an internal fortitude, but an external practice that redefines the transmission of information, empathy, and integrity.

Recommendations for Institutions

Confronting toxic workplace relationships involves more than personal fortitude; it requires systemic understanding, proactive leadership, and an organizational culture founded on equity and compassion. This study presents the following recommendations for academic institutions aiming to prevent and address relational toxicity in a constructive and ethical manner:

Explicit Guidelines on Professional Behavior

Institutions need to set clear rules that define proper behavior and specifically identify harmful actions in relationships, like quiet exclusion, ignoring someone professionally, or abusing informal power. These recommendations should address not only harassment or bullying in their most severe manifestations but also acknowledge the detrimental effects of passive-aggressive behaviors and professional gatekeeping.

Action Item: Establish an Academic Cacademic codeial conduct that is disseminated during staff orientation and reviewed in ongoing training sessions.

Promote Transparent and Fair Work allocations.

The inequitable allocation of tasks and opportunity may foster impressions of favoritism or exclusion. Transparent systems for distributing teaching responsibilities, committee roles, and professional development opportunities help mitigate informal power disparities.

Action Item: Establish a computerized workload monitoring system available to all professors, guaranteeing responsibility and equilibrium.

Create Peer Reflection and Support Circles

Establishing secure, organized environments for staff to exchange experiences and offer mutual support might alleviate feelings of isolation. Peer circles or led reflective groups enable educators to navigate workplace issues without fear of retribution, fostering a culture of empathy.

Action Point: Commence monthly peer reflection forums overseen by professional facilitators, featuring rotating themes (e.g., collaboration, communication, self-care).

Invest in Leadership Development with Emotional Intelligence concentration.

Academic leaders sometimes ascend due to intellectual accomplishments rather than formal training in personnel management. Leadership development programs that integrate emotional intelligence, ethical decision-making, and conflict resolution can mitigate the normalization or neglect of toxic dynamics.

Mandate that department heads and administrators participate in annual workshops on leadership and relational ethics as a condition of their tenure.

Implement Regular Relational Climate Assessments

Anonymous feedback mechanisms can disclose preliminary indicators of discord, discontent, or detrimental conduct. Climate surveys must extend beyond satisfaction indicators to evaluate the emotional and relational well-being of departments.

Action Item: Conduct semi-annual climate evaluations accompanied by a subsequent action plan and a clear description of findings.

These ideas are based on the premise that healthy academic settings do not emerge spontaneously; they require intentional design, cultivation, and safeguarding. Confronting relational toxicity is essential not only for professional ethics but also for educational excellence, as faculty well-being significantly impacts teaching efficacy, student involvement, and institutional credibility.

Discussion

The results of this reflective investigation correspond with and enhance existing research on academic workplace dynamics, specifically with emotional labor, professional identity, and institutional culture. This study offers a nuanced, experience-near viewpoint by examining how educators absorb, respond to, and turn toxic behaviors in academia into educational meaning, building on past research (Keashly & Neuman; Hollis).

From Toxicity to Transformative Contemplation

Reflective writing demonstrates that even minor toxicity can provoke profound identity discussion. Utilizing Schön's notion of the "reflective practitioner," this study posits that excluded educators might reconceptualize their professional issues as opportunities for development, rather than just as impediments. Consequently, reflection serves as both a survival mechanism and a creative process, wherein adversity fosters enhanced self-awareness and pedagogical genuineness.

This corroborates Brookfield's assertion that critical thought is fundamentally political and transformative. Instead of passively tolerating toxic dynamics, educators who engage in sincere reflection regain agency by reinterpreting their narrative—not as victims, but as resilient agents dedicated to educational integrity.

The Unseen Effort of Emotional Regulation

Organizational discussions often overlook the emotional distress that occurs in hostile professional settings. The emotional labor required to manage exclusion, microaggressions, and power imbalances is substantial and frequently disproportionately burdens faculty members who endeavor to uphold civility and professionalism Bellas; Hochschild).

This study highlights the concealed cost of adopting the role of "the bigger person," wherein emotional restraint is anticipated yet seldom acknowledged. However, the results show that when people think carefully about this work, it can lead to intentional emotional intelligence, highlighting the need for organizations to acknowledge and support these efforts through leadership training and peer support systems.

Reasserting Pedagogy as Defiance

In this study, teaching emerged as a critical locus of meaning-making and resilience. Toxic surroundings may undermine an educator's motivation or sense of belonging; yet, the act of teaching offers a realm for reconnection, allowing for the reaffirmation of ideals such as empathy, fairness, and clarity in practice. This conclusion aligns with Palmer's [23] claim that effective teaching emanates from the integrity of the teacher's inner life.

Instead of withdrawing, educators in these situations may enhance their teaching practice as a form of subtle defiance—a means to preserve what the institution may neglect: dignity, connection, and purpose. Consequently, the classroom transforms into both a venue for education and a refuge for personal rejuvenation and educational equity.

Engaging in the Dialogue on Institutional Ethics

This study promotes a human-centered comprehension of academic professionalism by presenting a grounded narrative that circumvents direct exposure while addressing challenging truths. In contrast to impersonal approaches, this analysis emphasizes the emotional and relational dimensions of academic life, often overlooked in formal institutional policies. This work contributes to discussions on how organizations might transcend mere compliance to foster ethical, emotionally aware cultures characterized by equitable power distribution and the protection and nurturing of professional dignity.

Excellent! Menambahkan subbagian mengenai pengalaman gender atau fakultas awal karierrr akan memperkaya artikel Anda dan menunjukkan kedalaman analisis serta perhatian terhadap kelompok rentan dalam konteks akademik yang beracun.

Kedua topik ini sangat relevan dan dapat dimasukkan sebagai subbagian dalam bagian Diskusi arena mereka merupakan perluasan dari temuan utama, bukan temuan baru. Ini akan memperdalam dan memperluas diskusi.

Gendered Aspects of Toxicity

Women in academia do not consistently experience toxic professional dynamics. Multiple research studies indicate that women in academia experience disproportionate impacts from subtle exclusion, emotional silence, and informal gatekeeping [24] [25]. These experiences are frequently exacerbated by gendered behavioral expectations—such as being "pleasant," "supportive," or "non-confrontational"—which hinder women from identifying or opposing toxic behaviors without being viewed as "difficult" or "emotional."

In reflective narratives, these gendered constraints may result in emotions of guilt, self-censorship, or imposter syndrome. According to Sara Ahmed [26], institutional cultures frequently seem neutral while subtly undermining women's agency through established norms. Such an observation underscores the necessity for gender-sensitive institutional policies and support systems that actively deconstruct conventional assumptions around membership, leadership, and discourse in academic environments.

Early-Career Academics and Power Disparities (more)

Early-career scholars encounter distinct vulnerability in detrimental contexts. Their constrained institutional authority, unstable employment status, and reliance on senior colleagues for guidance, recommendations, or access to research opportunities render them more vulnerable to exclusion or exploitation [27].

Reflective narratives from novice educators frequently disclose conflicts between the inclination to voice concerns and the apprehension of professional repercussions. This cultivates a culture of silence, where individuals tolerate poison instead of confronting it, resulting in fatigue and an early departure from academia. Consequently, institutions must implement mentoring frameworks and assessment mechanisms that safeguard emerging academics from the misuse of authority and promote equitable professional growth.

5. Conclusions

This article has examined the dynamics of toxic professional relationships in academic environments from a narrative-reflective perspective. The investigation has elucidated how nuanced exclusion, informal power dynamics, and emotional distress can influence the experiences of educators, particularly those in the early stages of their careers or belonging to underrepresented groups.

This study emphasizes the resilience and agency of educators in converting hardship into insight, rather than assigning blame. Through introspective thinking, many opt to realign with their fundamental ideals, discovering strength in pedagogy, student involvement, and authentic practice. This process transcends simple survival; it embodies transformation. In consideration of these insights, numerous pedagogical implications arise for educators, academic leaders, and institutions:

Reflection as a Mechanism for Development

Promoting structured reflective practices among educators—such as journaling, peer dialogue, or narrative writing—can facilitate the processing of relational conflicts and the reconnection with professional purpose. Reflection ought to be institutionalized not merely as a self-help technique but as a valid form of pedagogical research.

Instruction as an ethical foundation

In times of instability within professional environments, the classroom may serve as a stabilizing anchor. Educators who embrace the principles of empathy, justice, and student-centeredness frequently reframe their teaching as not merely a duty, but as a significant act of resistance and healing. Institutions ought to acknowledge and endorse teaching quality as an emotional and ethical endeavor.

Equity in Professional Culture

Initiatives to establish equitable academic settings must transcend mere policy formality. Toxicity frequently flourishes in the lack of accountability and emotional intelligence. Pedagogical development should therefore encompass relational competencies: conflict resolution, inclusive communication, and ethical decision-making.

Assistance for At-Risk Populations

Early-career academics, women, and others on the periphery of institutional authority necessitate specialized assistance. Mentorship initiatives, equitable acknowledgment frameworks, and secure reporting systems can safeguard and empower individuals most impacted by detrimental dynamics.

This paper contends that while toxicity in academia is genuine and frequently suppressed, it may be recontextualized through reflective and ethical pedagogy. By prioritizing care, authenticity, and relational accountability, educators and institutions can foster a culture in which professionalism is characterized not merely by productivity, but by human dignity and reciprocal respect.

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