



HOW SAFE ARE OUR TEACHERS?

IN 2005 A PICTURE EMERGED of teachers in Newfoundland who were experiencing a high level of stress, overloaded and bombarded with massive changes and unrealistic time demands that left them feeling overwhelmed, helpless and powerless, exhausted and disillusioned.¹ They described themselves as having almost no authority outside the classroom and very little inside. The perception was that abuse toward teachers was becoming more prevalent and the fear of violence a greater concern.

Evidence on school violence shows that female teachers are twice as likely as male teachers to experience abuse and harassment by students, and teachers in general are three times as likely to be attacked as students on a per capita basis. However, almost all the research into school violence focuses on student-student violence; very little has examined the psychological effects of assault on teachers. Unlike many other professionals, teachers often face their challenges in relative isolation from their peers. Teachers are rarely, if ever, invited to explore the personal, subjective content of their teaching lives; as a result, most of the public remains in the dark about the teaching environment.

A COMMON THREAD THROUGH ALL THESE ISSUES WAS THE VEIL OF SILENCE WITH REGARD TO THE SAFETY OF TEACHERS IN THEIR CLASSROOMS.

In 2006, I conducted a study in Newfoundland to determine the level of abuse and/or violence experienced by teachers, the nature of that abuse/violence, its personal impact, and whether Newfoundland teachers feel safe in their workplaces. For the purposes of this study, violence was defined as “any threatened, attempted, or actual harm to a person or persons.” Behaviour that would induce fear also falls into this category. Abuse was defined as “maltreatment, to be verbally insulted, to be the recipient of harsh, coarse, or foul language, or language which implies attack.”

The following experiences are those of a focus group of eight teachers, face-to-face interviews with 23 teachers across the island, and more than 300 teachers who answered a lengthy questionnaire that was mailed to 1,000 randomly selected teachers from K-12. The data collected from all three sources portrayed a picture of teachers who often face abusive language, harassment, threats, and the possibility of physical violence at their workplaces and sometimes at home. Teachers in this study perceived a systemic failure to recognize this problem and to address it adequately. It is both noteworthy and a source of concern that female teachers represented a higher percentage of the respondents in every category on the questionnaire.

Teachers reported that most incidents occurred in the classroom but that school corridors and school grounds were often the scene of abuse/violence as well. Abusive phone calls were received at home by many of the respondents on both the surveys and in the interviews. In some cases, they reported damage to their home and/or property.

VERBAL AND PHYSICAL ABUSE

The significant issues emerging from this study were the presence of fear, intimidation, and threats; the realities of the abuse/violence experienced in the workplace; and a perceived lack of concern and support for teachers' safety and well-being. A common thread through all these issues was the veil of silence with regard to the safety of teachers in their classrooms, similar to the silence surrounding teachers' workplace stress.²

Many teachers indicated in writing and in the interviews that they were afraid of students' reactions, and so they often ignored behaviours they would rather have addressed. A teacher wrote on the survey: “The joy of teaching is



EN BREF D'après une recherche, les abus dirigés contre les enseignants deviennent plus courants et la crainte de la violence s'accroît. L'étude effectuée à Terre-Neuve en 2006 visait à établir le niveau d'abus ou de violence que vivent les enseignants, la nature de ces abus ou actes de violence, les répercussions personnelles (physiques, émotionnelles, professionnelles), ainsi qu'à déterminer si les enseignants terre-neuviens se sentent en sécurité au travail. On constate que l'intimidation, les menaces et le harcèlement (physique et verbal), ainsi que l'effet cumulatif des problèmes disciplinaires, sapent le plaisir d'enseigner de nombreux enseignants, qui perçoivent qu'il y a peu de préoccupation et de soutien pour leur sécurité et leur bien-être. Ces problèmes se caractérisent aussi par un voile de silence à l'égard de la sécurité des enseignants en classe.

eroding... My profession is beginning to feel like a penal system where I do not feel safe or effective anymore... I am suffering both the physical and emotional effects of stress because of this." Quite often, as they related their experiences, these teachers expressed concern for the student aggressors. They understood that violence at school often reflects a difficult home environment and society in general. However, empathy for the circumstances was of little comfort when faced with the possibility of violence and the fear that a particular student might harm himself or someone else.

Sexually inappropriate remarks, usually directed at female teachers, and almost always made by male students, were very upsetting to these teachers.

They were demoralizing for the teachers to whom the abuse was directed and often for the female students in the class as well. One teacher told of having a used condom thrown at her, another of a used tampon thrown at her. The language directed at some of the teachers, and reported in both the interviews and the surveys, was so offensive it was difficult to hear second-hand, let alone imagine how it must have felt to experience it first-hand.

Teachers related numerous examples of student intimidation, threats, and challenges to authority, for example:

- "We'll be waiting for you at the bottom of the hill with a baseball bat buddy."
- A student threatened to kill my dog and my family.
- He stopped two feet from my desk and said "I'm going to fucking kill you."
- A student threatened to drive my teeth down my throat.
- A recent incident that had great significance for me was a student saying to me that he had a gun.

One teacher remembered well her feelings of fear when she was unable to reach anyone on the intercom to help her with a volatile student: "You try to stop me (from leaving the room) and I will punch you out." Another teacher was warned, "If you stand in my way I'll knock you down like I did Miss —." And from another: "Students now think nothing of cursing on you. Their language wouldn't make The Trailer Park Boys!" There were also many incidents reported of threats to destroy personal property.

Such verbal abuse appears to be so common that many of the teachers said it was pointless to send students to the office or to reprimand them in any way because it took too much time. Teachers reported that they were not even safe in their own homes; they were sometimes verbally abused on the phone by unidentified students. Sometimes the calls could be traced and sometimes not.

Students are intimidated too. When one teacher was threatened with physical harm by a student, only two students in the class would come forward to say they had heard the threat. The teacher tried to understand. "Everyone was afraid of him. They were all about 13 years old, and you can understand them being afraid. But it adds to the feelings of isolation."

For the majority of teachers, the most satisfying aspect of teaching is the relationships they establish with their students. It takes a substantial amount of time and energy to maintain discipline in most classrooms, but the effort required to remain effective in large classes, with students who exhibit multiple problems, can take its toll. Intimidation, threats, harassment and bullying (both physical and verbal), and the cumulative effect of discipline problems erode the joy of teaching. Participants in this study exhibited fear, feelings of vulnerability, and high levels of stress.

Commenting on her fear for safety, the effect this has on the learning environment, and the importance of administrative support, one teacher wrote on the survey:

Administrators should act as leaders at ground zero. Teachers and students should be able to go to school without fear. Something must be done about this problem.... At the very least, we know that careers have been ruined and many students and teachers dread coming to school. This is a sad, sad commentary on the system as it is currently.

ABUSE BY PARENTS

Students were responsible for most of the reported physical threats and assaults toward teachers, but some parents were guilty as well. One teacher was threatened by a parent with a hockey stick, leaving him with feelings of "fear and isolation" because he felt unsupported by the school board. Another teacher, whose arm had been grabbed by a parent, was left with bruises. Many other similar experiences were reported.

Incidents of parents arriving at school unannounced, angry and demanding, were reported many times in this study. These events had long-lasting effects on the participants and their ability to feel relaxed in their classrooms. One young teacher called her first year of teaching a "baptism by fire". She had not expected to be abused by parents. She spoke of one parent who threatened and intimidated her to the point that she almost hoped to be fired so she would not have to face that parent again. "I would look out and there she was in the hallway. My heart would be racing, 'thinking what does she want today?'"

Another teacher recalled the following incident, which caused her to fear for her life. A parent arrived at school in a rage, demanding to see me. He roamed the corridors using a loud, angry tone to inquire as to my whereabouts. He left the building only when the vice-principal said he would call the police. He told the vice-principal that I "had better watch it."

Situations such as these cause a high level of fear for the teachers' personal safety and sometimes that of their families. Abusive phone calls were widely reported – some much worse than others. One teacher received a recorded phone

message from a parent threatening to harm both him and his family; the message was picked up by one of the teacher's children, causing panic and fear for the entire family. When another teacher called home to report a student's misbehaviour, the parent threatened to come to the school "to straighten you out."

While many teachers reported similar experiences, they also expressed appreciation for those parents who did support them and helped lessen the day-to-day stresses with their pleasant comments and open communication. "We have parents who are wonderful. They thank us. They really do help make up for the others."

ADMINISTRATIVE ABUSE

A considerable number of the teachers participating in this study reported administrators whose use of power and control caused them to feel intimidated and fearful. This was especially so for younger teachers who did not have tenure and who feared they might not be hired the following year if they said anything. Some teachers reported being verbally reprimanded in front of a class and/or parents. They felt this form of intimidation was "to illustrate who was in charge." One teacher said that accusations and unsupportive behaviours by an administrator caused so much stress that it was "incapacitating". After moving from a school where she felt abused by her administrator to a better teaching environment, one teacher wrote on the survey "I have gone from hell to heaven."

Trust, respect, and fairness between school administrators and teachers create a sense of belonging and connectedness. Verbal abuse, belittling, and workload abuse achieve the opposite.

REPERCUSSIONS OF ABUSE AND/OR VIOLENCE

The negative impact of intimidation by students, parents, and administrators caused several teacher participants to refer to themselves as "victims" and as "violated", yet they felt they had little opportunity to address the incidents let alone find resolution: "We are left in our own little world,

fighting our own battles."

Thirty-four percent of the survey respondents reported physical injuries due to work related violence. Those who did not report the incident indicated most frequently that "no action would have been taken" and "because I know the support is not there." The most commonly reported outcome of abuse/violence on a teachers' career was increased absenteeism. Twenty-five percent of the survey respondents reported having to take time off work due to injuries sustained from incidents of violence. Three teachers reported being absent from work due to injuries for more than six months.

The impact of abuse/violence on teachers' physical well-being included sleep disturbances, headaches, fatigue, gastrointestinal complaints, uncontrollable crying, teeth grinding, and back aches. The emotional impact included frustration, increased stress, anxiety, anger, irritability, disgust, helplessness, sadness, depression, fear of re-victimization, guilt, mistrust of others, and low self-esteem.

In the absence of support, stress increased and the teachers felt emotionally isolated. Teachers in this study perceived further systemic abuse/violence when school policies either did not exist or were not followed, when disruptive and abusive behaviour in the classroom was dismissed as not serious, and when verbal abuse and threats toward teachers were ignored.

CONCLUSION

The negative impact of abuse/violence on careers and the physical and emotional well-being of teachers is evidenced in this study and highlights the need to take steps to reduce abuse/violence directed toward teachers in our schools. Some students regularly threaten and assault teachers with few, if any, consequences. Teachers' accounts of these actions are often not accepted. The victim is often seen as the cause. Sexual harassment is viewed as a harmless prank, undermining a teacher's request for protection or retribution.

The system's failure to manage and deal with abuse/violence at school appears to be shouldered personally by teachers. Whether intentional or unintentional, the refusal to acknowledge this problem in the profession is damaging to teachers and to students, whose learning environment is impacted as well. An environment of fear and intimidation cannot be a good place in which to work or learn.

In today's social context, we see an increasing emphasis on advocacy for the safety of our children, and that is as it should be. This data suggests an equally important need for greater advocacy for teachers and their safety. **!**

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Notes

- 1 Linda Youngusband, *High School Teachers' Perceptions of Their Working Environment in Newfoundland: A Grounded Theory Study* (Unpublished Thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2005).
- 2 Lynda Youngusband, *High School Teachers' Perceptions of Stress in their Work Environment in Newfoundland: A Grounded Study* (Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Muller Aktiengesellschaft and Co., KG, 2008).



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