

Research Briefs

Title

Aggression in Schools

Background

In recent years, the media has paid significant attention to the prevalence and impact of aggression in schools. However, as Santor, Bruckert and McBride (2019) pointed out, “surprisingly, the workplace violence experienced by educators has received limited scholarly attention in Canada” (p 4). Curran, Viano and Fisher (2019) wrote “the conversation around school safety has focused largely on the safety of students” (p 21); they argued that attention should also be paid to teachers because of the impact of violence on teachers’ ability to teach and their overall well-being.

The prevalence of violence against teachers is not well understood, in part because of the studies that are available: there is no common agreement about what violence means or about what time frame should be used to measure prevalence. Canadian teacher organizations are now beginning to track the issue and in 2018, the CBC reported that a CTF pan-Canadian study of member organizations found that “between 41 and 90 per cent of surveyed teachers, depending on the jurisdiction, had experienced or witnessed violence directed toward teachers from students or parents. Violence was classified as everything from verbal harassment and swearing, to physical threats and assault” (CBC 2018). While these Canadian statistics vary greatly, the numbers are sobering and they illustrate a clear need for policy makers to craft meaningful policy solutions to mitigate risk factors for aggression and to support teachers. Wilson, Douglas and Lyon (2011), researchers who completed a study for the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF), argued that “violence against teachers should be considered a salient and concerning problem” (p 2354), given the frequency with which teachers experience aggression.

Research also points out that the type of aggressions teachers experience can be different according to specific characteristics. For example, the Ontario English Catholic Teachers’ Association (OECTA), the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation (OSSTF) and the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) worked together to conduct a member survey in 2017; they found that “elementary schools tend to experience more threats and acts of violence, while high schools experience higher rates of harassment” (OECTA 2017, 2). In addition, research has also shown that personal characteristics such as gender, race and disability may place teachers at higher risk because “workplace harassment is not evenly distributed” (Santor, Bruckert and McBride 2019, 25). Finally, studies have found that teachers may experience aggression from multiple actors: students, parents or colleagues. McMahon et al (2014) wrote that “parent and colleague offenses tended to be harassment oriented, whereas student offenses were high across all three categories (harassment, property offenses, and physical offenses)” (p 757).

2019/2020



Finally, the impact of violence on teachers can be significant. “Stress, mental health challenges, and physical health concerns inevitably impact educators’ social and personal interactions and even what they can, and cannot, do in their leisure time” (Santor, Bruckert and McBride 2019, 17). These impacts can lower teacher efficacy and well-being, and ultimately lead to teachers either leaving to “teach at another school or to leave the teaching profession entirely” (Curran, Viano and Fisher 2019, 22). Given the seriousness of the issue, it is important that policy makers act to mitigate risk factors associated with aggression in schools and to support teachers who have been the subject of aggression or violence.

Keywords

Violence, Aggression, Teachers, Victimization

Key strategic considerations

The issue of aggression and violence toward teachers is not well understood. Legislation provides parameters to assure employees that their workplaces are safe. In order to improve working conditions for teachers, the Association, working with education partners, must work toward understanding the impact of aggression in schools on teachers as well as outlining what mechanisms must be put in place to mitigate risks faced by teachers on the job.

Sources and further reading

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