

Understanding Aggression(s) in Alberta Schools and School Communities





The Alberta Teachers' Association

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Preface

The issue of aggression in schools as it affects students has commanded widespread attention in the scholarly literature. However, the same cannot be said of violence as it is experienced by teachers and school leaders, even though, as Curran, Viano and Fisher (2019, 23) note, “current research on teacher victimization indicates that it is a widespread problem in schools.” In addition, the research that does exist is often “difficult to synthesize in part because [the studies] have employed a variety of different definitions and methodologies” (Santor, Bruckert and McBride 2019, 4). However, the issue of aggression against teachers and school leaders is receiving increased attention in the media and from teachers’ organizations across Canada.

In response, the Alberta Teachers’ Association struck an ad hoc committee to guide an inquiry into the experience of Alberta teachers and school leaders with aggression in schools. The committee comprised field members, Provincial Executive Council members and Association staff. The committee members were Greg Jeffery, Robert Mazzotta, Shelley Svidal, Jennifer Allen, Nancy Ball, Don Brookwell, Lisa Everitt, Anne-Marie Huizing, Diane Sellars-Myshchyshyn, Carmen Steinburg and Kevin Wood. This research report represents their collective work, and I thank them for their service to the Alberta teaching profession.

In addition, I wish to acknowledge Kevin Douglas, an internationally recognized professor of clinical forensic psychology at Simon Fraser University, and Catherine S Shaffer, a doctoral student in experimental forensic psychology, for the tremendous expertise they contributed to this important research project. Of particular note, Douglas was instrumental in developing the survey for Alberta teachers, as well as guiding the focus group conversations with teachers and school leaders. The analysis provided by Douglas and Shaffer was essential not just to documenting incidence rates of aggression toward teachers and school leaders but also to helping us better understand the risk factors for aggression and the impact of aggression on members of Alberta’s teaching profession.

I would also like to thank Calvin Fraser, who undertook the difficult task of authoring this research report, integrating the data analysis provided by Douglas and Shaffer with the existing literature on aggression toward teachers. As well, I wish to acknowledge the work of Document Production staff, particularly Joan Steinbrenner, Joanne Maughn, Kristina Lundberg and Julie Woo, in ensuring that the final report was beautifully produced and presented.

In closing, I extend my gratitude to the 561 teachers and school leaders in Alberta’s public education system who took the time and effort to respond to the survey, as well as those who participated in the focus groups. Their insights will guide the Association’s work in helping Alberta’s teaching profession to grapple with the complex issue of aggression toward teachers and school leaders.

Dennis E Theobald
Executive Secretary

Summary

In response to increased concerns about violence and bullying directed at teachers, in 2019 the Alberta Teachers' Association struck the Committee on Understanding Aggression(s) in Alberta Schools and School Communities and conducted an online survey, as well as in-person focus groups, attending to this issue. This is the first time this line of inquiry has been followed directly with members of the Association. The findings are consistent with prior research on this topic and provide information about actual conditions in Alberta schools.

The survey responses revealed teachers' and school leaders' concerns that aggression against teachers has been worsening in schools and that the problem has been neither effectively addressed nor recognized. Bullying and violence caused physical and psychological injury to up to 50 per cent of the teachers, who also perceived inadequate support at the school level. They reported inconsistent policy implementation and consequent distrust, and they attributed the inconsistencies to forces external to the school that create demands that weaken school leaders' ability to deal effectively with bullying and violence. Aggression in schools connects to complex student needs—disruptive behaviour occurs in regular classrooms in ways that harm teachers and other students, not only directly when incidents occur but also indirectly through questionable protocols for dealing with the incidents. Teachers reported having some training to deal with violence and aggression, but they also reported that current professional development was not meeting apparent and increasing needs.

This study found that bullying comes primarily from students. However, societal changes, such as consequence-free access to social media and lowered expectations when it comes to acceptable behaviour, have also increased parent aggression. Expectations for parents are neither clear nor well understood.

Solutions for this pervasive problem lie in increased awareness, staffing and policy support. The conclusion of this report outlines 11 recommendations for addressing the concerns raised by respondents.

This study's findings are comparable to findings from across Canada reported by other teachers' organizations, including the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF 2019), which compiled the results of these studies to date. Research by academics and other groups complements the teacher research. At the same time, as Santor, Bruckert and McBride (2019, 4) report, "Surprisingly, the workplace violence experienced by educators has received limited scholarly attention in Canada." While this study provides a snapshot of the Alberta experience, it also suggests a need for both further study and action.

Context and Research Questions

Schools are meant to be safe spaces. Canadian research has shown the importance of school safety and has identified the characteristics that increase safety in schools. A key focus of the current research is continued safety and continued improvement in safety for students. Schools address identified issues to keep students safe. Further, legislation, policy and commitment from all groups involved in education exist to strengthen safety. Still, a need for attention to teacher safety exists across Canada.

In 2019, the Association's Provincial Executive Council (PEC) struck an ad hoc committee of PEC members, Association staff and field members to attend to issues in teachers' experience with violence and bullying in Alberta schools. The members of the Committee on Understanding Aggression(s) in Alberta Schools and School Communities were as follows:

- Greg Jeffery, Chair
- Robert Mazzotta, Secretary
- Shelley Svidal, Administrative Secretary
- Jennifer Allen (field member)
- Nancy Ball (PEC)
- Don Brookwell (PEC)
- Lisa Everitt (Association staff)
- Anne-Marie Huizing (Association staff)
- Diane Sellars-Myshchyshyn (field member)
- Carmen Steinburg (field member)
- Kevin Wood (field member)

This Alberta report is one of several studies for which Canadian teachers' organizations surveyed their members. The CTF (2019) reports on results from surveys conducted by the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) (in 2019), the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) (in 2017), the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) (in 2017), the Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers (QPAT) (in 2018), the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (STF) (in 2016), the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) (in 2005) and the Manitoba Teachers' Society (MTS) (undated). These survey results are supplemented by expanding university research, as well as widespread media and public attention to both individual incidents of violence and the underlying concerns.

Aggression against teachers is recognized internationally as an issue, with recent studies showing large numbers of victimized teachers from diverse countries. Moon and McCluskey (2020, 123–24) refer to studies from Korea, the Czech Republic, the United States, Belgium and Canada, and they call aggression against teachers “ubiquitous and widespread” and speak to “a significant impact on emotional distress and/or negative job performance.” Overall, their review of existing literature revealed “substantial negative consequences” (p 123). Like other researchers, they categorize their findings at least in part by degree of severity, saying that “less serious victimizations such as verbal abuse and noncontact aggression are most common” (p 128). Still, the CTF study (2019, 1–2) clearly shows that an incident can be nonphysical but violent in its impact and that such incidents are widespread in Canada (see Figure 1).

QPAT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 56% of teachers experienced at least one violence incident • 84% of teachers say violence in schools is worrying
ETFO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 70% of teachers personally experienced, or witnessed, violence against another teacher • 74% of teachers say violence is a growing concern
OECTA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 90% of teachers experienced some form of violence or harassment • 85% of teachers say violent incidents are increasing
OSSTF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 82% of teachers are subject to repeated disrespectful student behaviours • 36% of teachers are bullied by students, 38% of those bullied have had their personal belonging or property vandalized
MTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principals and vice-principals (78%) were more likely to be ‘flourishing’ at work than those not in leadership roles (66%) • Teachers who experienced violence reported that it had a negative impact on their work performance
STF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 41% of teachers experienced harassment at work (78% emotional harassment / 66% verbal harassment) • 51% of teachers say that violence has increased in the last 5 years
BCTF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 94% of teachers reported experiencing school-related bullying or violence at some point in their career • 34% of all violence incidents occurred online, through email, or social media

FIGURE 1. A cross-Canada concern. Reprinted with permission from CTF (2019, 2).

One issue evident across Canada is the lack of common definitions for violence and aggression in schools. Santor, Bruckert and McBride (2019, 4) note, “The studies that have examined violence against educators are difficult to synthesize in part because they have employed a variety of different definitions and methodologies.”

Connected to the inconsistency in definitions is inconsistency in enforcement. Even occupational health and safety (OHS) rules and terms lack a consistent vision, definitions and enforcement measures. Vosko et al (2011), in a research paper commissioned by the Law Commission of Ontario, refer to the failure to extensively enforce employment standards or OHS regulations because of extensive use of voluntary compliance, and “deficiencies commonly identified include the tendency towards minimal penalties or sanctions” (p 62). They write, “Prosecutions may be used, but generally as a last resort” (p 6). Still, the regulations provide a minimum standard and help to establish reasonable expectations.

Enormous public interest in the question of violence in schools is evident through the numerous items in Canadian newspapers, on television and in other media outlets. Some of this interest has focused on aggression against teachers. In particular, the *Globe and Mail* recently conducted extensive research and sought information from 21 school boards across Canada to explore the question, “How do school boards keep teachers safe while ensuring an education for students with complex needs?” (Alphonso 2019b). This article was a follow-up to a story about parents concerned about their children’s safety and the inability of an Ontario school to provide for a violent student (Alphonso 2019a). *The Star* has reported on violence in Calgary schools (Jeffrey 2019). Global News has also given attention to violence in schools, reporting on 311 incidents of violence in one year against teachers in Edmonton schools (Wong 2018) and on the CTF study’s finding that four teachers in ten across the country have experienced workplace violence and bullying (Vomiero 2018). These articles reflect the widespread public concern about this issue. That public attention is mirrored in the United Kingdom, the United States and elsewhere. In particular, in the United States, a post on The Educator’s Room website calls bullying of teachers an “epidemic” (Sorge 2013).

Wilson, Douglas and Lyon (2011, 2354) note that “the majority of research has focused on the impact of student against student violence.” However, as a result of the recent media attention and public concern, educational researchers and respected academic journals are increasingly reporting on studies in Canada and elsewhere that focus on aggression against teachers.

The issue of violence in schools is incredibly complex, with elements that are socioeconomic, values based, rights based, politically sensitive, employment based, education based, often personal and always requiring funding. However, any study needs to have a focus. While some teachers’ organization surveys have focused only on student violence against teachers, the Association chose to seek information on three areas of sociodemographic and school characteristics to

- determine Alberta teachers’ experience with various forms of school-based bullying and violence,
- understand the nature of bullying and violence against teachers in a school setting, and
- determine the adverse consequences for teachers arising from workplace bullying and violence.

The survey responses provide a snapshot of teachers’ experience with bullying and violence and provide information about each topic. As part of an expanding national picture of working

conditions for teachers in schools, this survey and its findings will allow the Association to act and speak in an informed way on the needs of members in discussions with employers, the public and the government, in the interests of improving public education for all students and for society in general.

Canadian teachers' organization research, often conducted in partnership with university research, has advanced bullying and violence as a serious issue across Canada—an issue complex in definition, impact, policy, protocol and relationships. The teacher research provides both a reason for seeking to reduce the frequency of violence and a basis for further work and research. It differs from much other research in its practical orientation and direct connection to the teaching–learning situation.

This Alberta study contributes to the CTF's (2019, 1) conclusion that “emerging patterns from all regions demonstrate that the reality of violence against teachers cannot be ignored.”

The Alberta Survey

The Association's study investigated the following:

- How frequently teachers experienced aggression in schools
- How teachers experienced that aggression
- The effects of that aggression on teachers
- Teachers' knowledge of policies related to aggression in schools
- Teachers' satisfaction with the implementation of existing policies

Two independent researchers with experience studying school bullying and violence conducted the survey and provided an initial internal report on the findings:

- Catherine S Shaffer, doctoral student in experimental forensic psychology, Department of Psychology, Simon Fraser University
- Kevin S Douglas, professor of clinical forensic psychology, Department of Psychology, Simon Fraser University; director and threat assessment specialist at Protect International Risk and Safety Services in Vancouver; and senior research advisor, University of Oslo

A random stratified sample of 4,000 Alberta teachers was invited to respond to an online survey in June 2019. The research includes responses only from teachers who had been teaching in Alberta in 2018/19, as they were asked to focus their inquiry responses on the previous school year. Teachers who met those criteria could not only speak to bullying and violence throughout their careers but also place a focus on the immediate school year. The demographics for the final sample of 561 were as follows:

- *Position held.* Of the respondents, 80 per cent were classroom teachers, 9 per cent were school administrators, and the rest were Association members in other positions in schools and district offices.
- *Assignment.* Of the classroom teachers, 76 per cent taught elementary, 8.2 per cent taught middle school, and 10.8 per cent taught high school.
- *Gender.* A large majority (79.9 per cent) of the respondents were female.
- *Experience.* Respondents' experience varied widely, from less than 1 year to 38 years, with an average experience of 13.7 years.
- *Age.* Over 60 per cent of the respondents were mid-career teachers between 30 and 50 years old.

Two small focus groups were conducted to supplement the survey and provide deeper insight into the themes arising from the survey. The similarity of the focus group participants' comments to the

survey responses is striking. Both agreed on the nature of the problems, the increases in aggression in regular classrooms, the lack of supports, the need for training and education, and the influence of parent behaviour. The focus group participants also echoed attributions of motivation for perpetrators.

Although the sample size for the study is moderate, it is sufficient for increasing understanding of the existence of concerns about aggression and the nature of those concerns. That understanding is strengthened by the study being conducted in two modes.

Because bullying and violence take many forms, the survey focused on 13 categories of aggression against teachers. The study used the definitions from Wilson, Douglas and Lyon (2011) of *bullying* as “non-physical behaviour intended to cause harm (e.g. harassment)” and from Douglas et al (2013) of *violence* broadly as “any threatened, attempted, or actual harm to person or persons.” Respondents reported on their personal experience and provided additional information for their most recent incident of bullying and violence in the 2018/19 school year (for example, weapon use, perpetrator relationship, location of incident, injuries, motivation and follow-up).

Findings and Analysis

As a first inquiry on violence and bullying against teachers in Alberta, this study has increased understanding of how teachers experience aggression, their rate of victimization and their susceptibility to being targeted. The results also provide information about the characteristics of perpetrators of violence and bullying. In addition, the study records how schools and school systems handle concerns; reports on teachers' satisfaction with the level of adherence to policy; and expands understanding of the consequences of violence and bullying for teachers, schools and the quality of education.

The key findings are discussed below.

KEY FINDING 1—FREQUENCY

Many Alberta teachers experience school-based bullying and violence at some point in their career. This is consistent with the CTF's (2019) overview of studies across Canada and with other research (Curran, Viano and Fisher 2019; McMahon et al 2014).

Violence and bullying against teachers are widespread in Alberta: 93 per cent of the respondents reported having experienced some form of bullying and aggression during their career. Even recognizing the limitation that those who had been victimized were most inclined to participate in a study of this nature, the identification of 521 victimized teachers from a relatively small group of 561 selected randomly reveals a problem that needs attention.

The violence and bullying identified in this study can be categorized as follows:

- Lesser categories of violence and bullying
- Moderate categories of violence and bullying
- Serious categories of violence and bullying

Lesser categories of violence and bullying include remarks that offend or intimidate and statements that harm a teacher's reputation. The responses show that most bullying involved face-to-face, direct communication but that 35 per cent of the incidents occurred online (through e-mail or social media). Research in the field of online bullying suggests that "unlike other forms of bullying, the harassment, humiliation, intimidation and threatening of others through cyberbullying occurs 24 hours a day. It is relentless and aggressive . . . There is no safe zone."¹ Online bullying is also permanent; it is never completely erased.

Moderate categories of violence and bullying include chronic intimidation, threats of violence (with or without a weapon), and property damage. Such victimization can be a constant reality. As one teacher said in a focus group, “I’ll still have the chair thrown at me tomorrow.”

Serious categories of violence and bullying include attempted or actual physical violence (with or without a weapon), threatened or actual violence against a family member, and stalking. Schools allegedly have zero tolerance for such behaviour, but the results of this study show that teachers experience a lack of effective tools, active support or political will to deal effectively with the problem. The combination of established routines (such as evacuating other students) and ineffective tools suggests that violence against teachers is becoming normalized as a condition.

Teachers reported that in 2018/19 weapons were used in 12.4 per cent of cases (88 respondent reports). While knives (4 incidents) and guns (6 incidents) were used in few cases, any instance is too many. Even an eight-year-old throwing rocks or books, or attacking with scissors or a stapler, can cause great harm.

Menesini and Salmivalli (2017) have reviewed more than 40 years of research on bullying in schools and identify such bullying as a global, complex and serious problem. They see the issue both as inherent in the nature of some individuals and as learned behaviour. As with most of the research on bullying, they focus on prevention and the effectiveness of reduction efforts for bullying by children. Noting that bullying compromises rights and exposes vulnerable people to risk, they see an “urgent” need to identify the “effective ingredients of these programmes” (p 248). The frequency with which teachers report victimization suggests that current efforts are inadequate and ineffective.

KEY FINDING 2—SUSCEPTIBILITY PATTERNS

Analysis of the data from this study suggests that teachers who are bullied or subjected to violence have identifiable characteristics. These characteristics offer information about likely targets of bullying or violence, while also raising many questions. These characteristics may reveal as much about informal societal values—reflected in attitudes, values, policies and practices from outside of the school—as they do about the school community.

Women experience more bullying than men. However, the survey results do not explain why there is a gender difference or whether attitudes are school generated or a societal perception.

Special education teachers experience more bullying than other teachers. A prima facie analysis suggests that this finding is logical because of the nature of some of the students these teachers work with. The high number of reports suggests that support procedures for teachers and students in special education are not sufficient. The repetition of violence with this group suggests that more-effective policies and procedures are needed for dealing with incidents when they first arise. This

finding in the Alberta study is consistent with the results of the ETFO (2018, 3) survey on violence, which found that “special education teachers are especially vulnerable. They report higher rates of violent incidents and were more often asked or required to wear Personal Protective Equipment (Kevlar) at work.”

Teachers with heavy teaching loads experience more bullying than other teachers. It is unclear whether this finding reflects school population size, class size or other considerations (such as teacher well-being). It may reflect the importance of having adequate time and teaching conditions to develop positive teacher–student relationships.

Teachers at schools with large numbers of students experience more incidents of bullying than teachers at schools with smaller populations. While this characteristic may be associated with the reported larger number of incidents for high school teachers than for teachers in the earlier grades, it may also reflect the importance of helping students deal with concerns in the earlier grades. Again, it may reflect differences in the nature of the time teachers spend with students and differences in teacher–student relationships at the two levels.

Elementary and middle school teachers reported higher levels of violence than high school teachers, who reported higher levels of bullying. This finding in Alberta is consistent with the OECTA (2017, 2) study, which found that “elementary schools tend to experience more threats and acts of violence, while high schools experience higher rates of harassment.” This finding may reflect older students’ increased levels of understanding and ability to manage their temper. It may reflect societal tolerance—for example, a 10-year-old will suffer few consequences from violent action, whereas a 16-year-old can face criminal charges. It may also relate more to external social conditions facing a teacher.

KEY FINDING 3—PERPETRATORS

Perpetrators of aggression come from identifiable groups in the school community: students, parents and colleagues.

Teachers reported that bullying was mainly perpetrated by students. About half of these incidents occurred during class time, and 28 per cent occurred during classroom management or discipline activities.

Student perpetrators directly taught by the victim had the following characteristics:

- 92 per cent were male,
- 38 per cent were in Grades 1–3, and
- 76 per cent had a history of violence.

Student perpetrators not taught by the victim had the following characteristics:

- 40 per cent were in Grades 7–9, and
- 67 per cent had a history of violence.

Incidents occurred during classroom activity (29 per cent) or during supervision times (such as in the hallway or on the bus).

Notably, elementary teachers reported experiencing more violence from students they taught than did teachers in the higher grades. An explanation for this is that as students develop skills and understanding, they shift to engaging in other forms of aggression.

Parent perpetrators of bullying were reported by 15 per cent of respondents. These perpetrators were most frequently male (88 per cent) and had a history of bullying or violence (53 per cent). About one-quarter of the incidents occurred during parent–teacher interviews. Expectations for parent interactions with teachers need to be clearly articulated, and the procedures in place should foster good habits.

Bullying by other staff was reported by 5–7 per cent of respondents. Respondents reported that in most of these instances (68 per cent), the perpetrator had a history of bullying and violence. Female teachers were slightly more likely to be victimized by colleagues than were male teachers, and incidents occurred both during classroom time (41 per cent) and outside of classroom time (26 per cent).

Much research has been done on the effects of bullying. Much less is available on why people bully, including research on nature versus nurture or environment versus genetics. The results of this study and others suggest that attention needs to be paid to the relationships between all participants. Santor, Bruckert and McBride (2019, 11) state,

High rates of harassment and violence are the result of several factors, including mental health difficulties, that are compounded by larger structural issues, such as high student–educator ratios, inadequate or non-existent special education resources, and a lack of mental health supports. In this context, personal protection equipment (PPE) and additional training are stopgaps; they are not, and indeed cannot be, solutions.

Time to build relationships may be a factor. A study conducted by the Department for Education (2018) in the United Kingdom found that teachers were concerned about time spent on behaviour monitoring—“having to manage unforeseen safeguarding events and/or sudden disciplinary issues that need addressing immediately, and then the record-keeping required as a result. These then had a knock-on effect on other tasks that were subsequently not addressed as planned” (p 13). Dealing with aggression and violence has the potential to create a vicious circle in which time spent on discipline rather than teaching may affect teaching quality and, thereby, perpetuate problems.

Participants in the Alberta study recognized the space and staffing limitations that prevented them from taking individual students to safe spaces and noted that the time spent on changing a student's behaviour meant that the teacher was "punched and kicked" over a long period of time. The continued presence of violent or bullying students affects classroom procedures, and student aggression takes a toll on the teacher and the other students. One respondent said, "We don't restrain the child, but we evacuate the entire classroom," referring to a common practice throughout the province. Another respondent reported having to teach for four months standing in one spot between two students who would otherwise fight, demonstrating how attending to the needs of bullying or violent students takes teacher time and presence away from other students.

Ryan (2016), writing from the perspective of corporate management, points out that modern leadership requires a leader to "look in the mirror" every day. She writes, "Empathetic, trust-based human leadership is not only the most effective way to lead a team but also the most profitable way to run a company." Leadership that prioritizes eliminating all types of victimization can use information about perpetrators to build toward empathy and understanding.

KEY FINDING 4—REPEATED BEHAVIOUR

Perpetrators often repeat their acts of bullying or violence.

The survey responses show that aggression is disproportionately practised by repeat offenders at all grade levels, that two-thirds to three-quarters of perpetrators of violence or bullying are repeat offenders, and that current practices for dealing with violence or bullying do not prevent repetition.

In the survey, 9 per cent of the respondents reported repeated acts of a threatening or harassing nature. The incidents took place in person (82 per cent), online (28 per cent), by telephone (27 per cent) or by other means. Most victims were female (92 per cent), and 86 per cent of them feared for their safety.

The survey respondents reported hearing such statements as "He does have that diagnosis" as a rationale for non-action and feeling that they were "just expected to deal with it." They felt that violence was being accepted as a norm and were seeking assistance to extend the existing responses to aggression. It is clear that it is time to examine practices in schools to determine what actions tacitly sanction or create repeated incidents.

Violence in schools is not a new problem. Kelly (2019) notes that as far back as 1996/97, the National Center for Education Statistics in the United States "found violence and crime to be far too common in the school setting" and that between 1992 and 2016, there were over 1,000 violent deaths at schools. In 2016, CBC News published a timeline of 43 killings and 39 woundings in 12 school shootings in Canada since 1975. Further, iResearchNet asks, "Toronto, Calgary, Ottawa, Montreal, Winnipeg, Vancouver, Victoria, Edmonton, Bowmanville, Brampton, Scarborough, Taber, and

Etobicoke—what do all these places have in common? They have all been the sites of newsworthy incidents of school violence.”²

Society appears to be increasingly tolerating violence. Lannon (2017) points out that killings are being shown on social media. Roziere and Walby (2018) report that throughout Canada, “SWAT teams are increasingly used by public police for routine police activities such as warrant work, traffic enforcement, community policing, and even responding to mental health crises and domestic disturbances.” Acceptance of aggression against teachers may be part of a larger societal pattern; however, this only heightens the need for examination of the issue.

Sally Varnham (2015), a professor of law at the University of Technology Sydney, writes about the liability of schools in the event of legal action because of failure to act against aggression: “Most would agree that a school that has knowledge of bullying behaviour within its grounds or online but arising out of school relationships, and fails to take remedial action, is complicit.” In effect, she is asking if a failure to act can be seen as sanctioning the action and if it is time to act more effectively. She is calling not for legal action but, rather, for “taking the problem seriously.”

KEY FINDING 5—REPORTING

The Alberta Education website highlights “legislation and practices to ensure that schools are welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments” as key information.³ The concern about safety in Alberta schools has been a matter of record since the mid-1990s and has resulted in the creation of support groups (such as the Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities), commitment from all educational organizations (policy), and legislation, including the *Education Act*.⁴ However, the findings of this study show that Alberta schools are not always safe environments for teachers.

Public policy sets a goal and outlines “the best or preferred means of carrying it out” (Bernard 2006). The province, school systems and individual schools have policies for handling violence and bullying. Those policies create standards and define reasonable expectations for all parties who deal with schools. The extent to which policy is followed is assessed by courts and tribunals to define reasonable actions. This study reveals both a lack of consistency in the use of established policies and varying levels of compliance with policy.

The respondents reported that policy was not followed more than half the time, with

- school policies and procedures followed most frequently (at 45 per cent),
- district policies and procedures followed 38 per cent of the time, and
- Alberta OHS policies and procedures followed 28 per cent of the time.

Notably, only 58 per cent of the respondents who reported an incident said that it was handled to their satisfaction. The level of satisfaction was lower when policy was not followed. Only 40 per cent

reported satisfaction on occasions when the appropriate school policy was not followed. When appropriate school policy was followed, satisfaction rose to 77 per cent. Similarly, only 47 per cent reported satisfaction when district policy on bullying or violence was not followed, while 82 per cent were satisfied when district policy was followed. In terms of Alberta OHS policy, only 38 per cent reported satisfaction when the appropriate OHS policy was not followed, while 86 per cent were satisfied when it was followed. Given these results, it is clear that following policy at any level will increase teachers' satisfaction with how an incident is addressed.

The survey responses suggest that policy is not well followed but do not indicate why this is the case. The focus group respondents expressed concern about the lack of accountability for not following policy but also commented on the failure of district-level administrators to support school-level administrators with respect to policy. Some worried about the possibility that following policy might upset parents. The ineffectiveness of current policy and practice is reflected by one teacher's comment that "the only policy is stay in the classroom with the child"—a strategy that is counterproductive at a time when classroom support from educational assistants (EAs) is being reduced or removed.

Other studies have raised similar questions about the effectiveness of policy. The OECTA (2017, 6) results state, "Overwhelmingly, teachers feel that the current policy, practices, and procedures in place to deal with violence in schools are inadequate." Santor, Bruckert and McBride (2019, 27), who surveyed ETFO members, write, "Our research reveals low rates of formal reporting of workplace violence by educators. Workplace Violence, Safe School, or Violent Incident Reports were completed for just slightly more than half (53%) of all instances of violence."

In the Alberta study, several factors affected whether a victim reported an incident:

- *Perpetrator history.* Victims were less likely to report an incident when the perpetrator had no history of violence or bullying (only 29 per cent reported). A majority (55 per cent) reported an incident when the perpetrator had such a history.
- *Weapon use.* When a weapon was threatened or present, 74 per cent of respondents reported the incident. When no weapon was involved, less than half (44 per cent) reported.
- *Injury.* When there was no injury or only a minor physical injury, only 47 per cent of respondents reported the incident. When a moderate or serious injury occurred, the reporting rose to 92 per cent.

These factors can be considered in relation to the disjuncture between policy and practice. Reporting is a first step toward prevention. Since most perpetrators of bullying and violence are repeat offenders, and teachers in schools often share supervision of students, reporting can allow for shared awareness, knowledge and expectations related to student behaviour. In addition, reporting supports making provisions for substitute teachers, who need to know what they may face in a given situation.

KEY FINDING 6—NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES

Bullying and violence are taking an enormous toll on Alberta teachers, adversely affecting their physical, psychological and teaching-related functioning. In this study, 91 per cent of the victims of violence and bullying reported adverse effects.

A very high percentage of respondents (90 per cent) reported experiencing emotional effects (such as increased stress, frustration, anxiety, sadness, helplessness, anger, irritability, mistrust of others, low self-esteem, fear of revictimization, depression, guilt and disgust). These emotional effects increased when the perpetrator was an administrator or another educator, when a weapon was involved, when the bullying or violence was repeated, when the incident involved violence as opposed to bullying, or when the incident involved stalking.

Nearly as many respondents (84 per cent) reported career-related effects resulting from violence and bullying, including loss of job satisfaction, lower morale and reduced teaching effectiveness. A significant number had considered leaving teaching. Career effects increased when a weapon was involved, when the bullying or violence was repeated, when the incident involved bullying as opposed to violence, or when the incident involved stalking. While 38 per cent reported decreased job satisfaction—particularly with repeated violence or bullying—the difference when compared with other teachers was not statistically significant. Teachers continue to be both resilient and strong in their satisfaction with teaching.

A high percentage of respondents (70 per cent) reported physical effects (such as sleep disturbance, fatigue, headaches, teeth grinding, weight change, backaches, hyper-alertness, gastrointestinal effects, appetite changes, uncontrollable crying, nausea, sweating, dizziness and tremors). The number of physical effects increased when a weapon was involved, when bullying and violence occurred on more than one occasion, or when the incident involved violence as opposed to bullying.

Physical injuries were reported in only 25 per cent of the incidents of violence. Most injuries required no medical treatment, 4 per cent required attention with treatment on one day only, and 1 per cent required hospitalization.

The negative consequences reported by Alberta teachers are consistent with those found by Wilson, Douglas and Lyon (2011, 2360), who state that the “literature suggests that violence against teachers is a common problem that potentially is associated with serious adverse consequences in the domains of personal functioning (physical and psychological health) and teacher-related functioning (teaching effectiveness, classroom management).” Kopecký and Sztokowski (2017), who included cyberbullying in their study of teachers in the Czech Republic, also found that bullying creates uncertainty in the victim for more than 10 per cent of both male victims and female victims.

Alberta teachers' reports of physical, psychological and career effects are also consistent with results from both the BCTF report (Shaffer et al 2018) and the ETFO report (Santor, Bruckert and McBride 2019).

KEY FINDING 7—ABSENTEEISM

A distinct outcome of bullying and violence that is costly for teachers, schools and the quality of education is absenteeism. Absenteeism may take the form of short- or long-term sick leave, leave without pay, or absence for medical treatment.

In the survey responses, more than half (56 per cent) of victims reported that bullying and violence caused them to be away from work for between half a day and 182 days (an average of 19 days, with a median of 3 days).

Most absences (68 per cent) involved mental health difficulties, while physical injury was the reason in 13 per cent of cases. Combined mental health and physical difficulties were cited in 19 per cent of cases. Absenteeism was more common for females than males, when the perpetrator was a colleague, when the incident involved a weapon, when serious or moderate injury occurred, when the incident involved violence as opposed to bullying, or when bullying or harassment was repeated.

The focus group participants agreed that bullying and violence increased absenteeism, and they suggested that it also increased medication use (such as antidepressants), created strong feelings of a lack of support, and created a disconnection between teachers and administrators. Their view was that bullying and violence leave many teachers feeling that they do “not know what to do in response to violence and aggression.” Their identification of the need for medication ties tightly to the reported fear, anxiety, distrust, loss of self-esteem and other emotional effects. The focus group participants also discussed feelings of vulnerability, the toll taken on one's personal life, and the sense of there being “no one to help” and “no one to go to.”

KEY FINDING 8—MOTIVATION AND INCIDENT CHARACTERISTICS

Perpetrator motivation and incident characteristics influence the severity of negative effects, absenteeism and lack of job satisfaction related to violence and bullying.

Some survey respondents (6 per cent) saw gender bias as a motivation for bullying. Fewer (1–2 per cent) saw other victim characteristics (such as age, weight, ethnicity, sexual orientation or religion) as a motivation. The focus group participants suggested that societal tolerance of rudeness, bias and prejudice carries into the school. Society has become less respectful—a 2019 CityNews poll found that 52 per cent of Canadians believe that crudeness has increased since 2014 (Gul and Nassar 2019). Social licence now extends to rudeness in bumper stickers, memes, cartoons, tweets and more.

Language that was until recently not tolerated in schools is now commonly used by parents and students.

The focus group participants spoke to the difference between the risk factors that exist relative to individual students or parents and those that are attributes of the system or the interactions between individuals. In their report to the Association, researchers Shaffer and Douglas (2019) label risks inherent to the individual as *substantive risk factors* and those that arise when dealing with a concern as *procedural or process risk factors*.

Substantive risk factors include mental health and trauma challenges, unstructured homes, police involvement, and weapon use. Parents, too, may demonstrate contributory substantive risk factors—parents may be in jail, may be bullies, or may be dealing with their own mental stress and health challenges (including drug use). Some parents may have difficulty processing information provided by the school. Some may have stability issues that mean frequent school changes and disruption for their children. Some may find it difficult to accept the idea that their child has issues, or may hold contrary ideas about the use of medication.

Procedural or process risk factors include students who can trigger behaviour for one another and students who need special help to deal with anger or stress. Likewise, some parents have difficulty interacting with school staff and become confrontational quickly. Others need support in managing conflicting views and opinions respectfully and fruitfully. Some parents remain uninvolved until they reach a point of anger and frustration. Process factors appear to be failing them when they resort to bullying and violence.

Labelling risk factors provides a way to perceive and dissect the elements of a conflict. While labelling in itself may not lead directly to a solution, identifying these elements can contribute to finding solutions to violence against teachers. It can help to depersonalize tense situations and permit discussion where it was not previously possible. Dissecting situations involving aggression and violence can allow for outcomes that satisfy wants and needs. This is an interest-based, utilitarian approach, as opposed to a punishment approach.

Participants in this study did not report that such an interest-based approach employing labelling is in use at this time. Yet they recognized elements of concern that would fit into each of these risk factor categories.

KEY FINDING 9—PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Almost half of the respondents reported having training related to managing bullying and violence. At the same time, they expressed a need for increased, ongoing training for all teachers and for individuals, with specialized training available on site.

As Table 1 shows, up to two-thirds of the respondents reported having competence to identify persons who pose a risk or to de-escalate situations that could become violent. Significantly, 62 per cent still indicated a need for additional education or training. Teaching effectiveness is weakened by the constant presence of bullying and violence, and confidence is bolstered through skill development.

TABLE 1. Training and Perceived Competence

Training on assessing and managing bullying and violence	Received	Self-declared competence
Identification of persons who might pose a risk of aggression or violence	43%	67%
De-escalation of situations that may escalate to violence	45%	54%
Managing potential risk for violence on an ongoing basis	58%	46%

The focus group participants agreed that there is insufficient preservice education and inservice training related to bullying and violence, but not on what training is needed or from where it should come (for example, universities, professional development, counselling or better use of community supports). One participant noted that some of the training given to EAs would also benefit teachers. Because real-life situations can differ from theoretical training situations, calls for on-site expert assistance, including well-trained intervention specialists and counsellors, also emerged.

A Cultural Problem Replete with Mixed Messages: Awareness of Aggression in Schools

This study's key findings demonstrate a need for increased awareness and exploration of the issue of aggression in schools to work toward resolution—to provide not only a safe work environment for teachers but also a healthy learning environment for students. Schools are safe, but teachers suggest that even as they promote student safety, their own safety can be at risk. As Santor, Bruckert and McBride (2019, 11) write, “While self-evident, it is nonetheless worth noting that it is precisely the responsibility to safeguard the wellbeing of the students in their charge that renders educators vulnerable.” That responsibility may be viewed differently when violence and bullying are rare occurrences.

Schools do not exist in isolation. They reflect society, and bullying and violence constitute a societal problem. A World Health Organization (WHO) study of bullying among school-aged children ranked Canada in the middle of the 35 countries studied.⁵ Public Safety Canada (2005) reports on numerous programs, charities, research groups and activities that started in the 1990s and continue to date, studying, among other issues, the growth of bullying connected to the growth of social media. PREVNet, the most influential cross-Canada organization working to stop bullying and violence by young people, states that the solutions are complex and lie in “education, research, training and policy change.”⁶ This complexity is reflected in the multifaceted recommendations for next steps that conclude this report.

The Alberta study suggests that consistent implementation of effective policy is a key step in addressing bullying and violence in schools; however, not all potential perpetrators will respect and respond to policy in the same way. School leadership has a symbiotic association with actual or potential conflict: leaders can influence conflict, but real or potential conflict can change a leadership decision. Values-based conflicts occur when deeply held beliefs and world views clash between groups; “good conflict” can advance an organization, whereas “bad conflict” can interfere with the achievement of goals (Giotis 2010).

Preservice teachers are trained that a clash may occur between personal values and organizational values. For example, a text used at the University of Alberta, *L'éthique professionnelle en enseignement* (Desaulniers and Jutras 2016), teaches that schools exist within a bounded rationality—whatever their personal values, school personnel must follow the laws and regulations laid out by the government, by school boards and by school leaders, as well as the professional conduct expectations of the profession. Schools and school leaders work under contracts of employment that bind them to

those laws, regulations and board policies. It is less easy to oblige parents and their children to stay within those same boundaries. Their rationality is not bounded in the same way.

This study is devoted to exploring teacher safety in the education system. Commitment to and priority of staff safety over other interests and priorities can be achieved only when it is a directive—a rule from the top. Strong leadership commitment from the top can set and enforce consistency in policy and policy implementation.

Many of the findings discussed here are not new. The RAND analysis of school safety programs in 2001 (Juvonen 2001) showed the prevalence of school violence, the connection between bullying and violence, and the “biases in reporting” (p 2) and questioned the assumptions that underlie existing programs. The results of the Association’s study suggest that the challenges have not changed. Reports of a continued need for support recurred throughout this study. Respondents felt that district leaders were “out of touch” with the bullying and violence that was happening and that school-based administrators were increasingly being directed to other priorities. This lack of support for teacher victims can begin to be addressed through consistent application of policy, improved assistance to address complex classrooms (including adequate support from EAs), and ongoing training.

At the same time, bullying can be so entrenched that it occurs without effective challenge. Duffy (2014) writes, “If the organizational environment didn’t foster it, workplace abuse would not flourish and would wither away.” She notes that an abuse-prone workplace has “a significant disconnect between the espoused values of the organization and the actual ones.”

Interestingly, education legislation and policy in Alberta appear to include all the tools necessary to keep teachers safe from aggressive behaviour in schools, yet teachers still report a lack of safety. The *Education Act* stresses safe schools for everyone:

- The preamble focuses on “safe learning environments.”
- Section 31 requires students “to respect the rights of others,” “comply with the rules of the school” and “be accountable to [their] teachers.”
- Section 33 obliges school boards “to provide a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment that includes the establishment of a code of conduct for students that addresses bullying behaviour.”
- Section 197 requires principals to “provide a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment” and to “maintain order and discipline.”
- Section 256 provides that “no person shall . . . conduct themselves in a manner detrimental to the safe operations of a school.”⁷

School board policy in Alberta operationalizes the law. All boards in their substantive policy use phrases such as “will not be tolerated” and “hold accountable,” but accompanying administrative policies appear to focus on dealing with all situations in a positive, future-focused way for the

offending student rather than on the others affected. Thus, while policies provide the possibility of severe discipline, including expulsion, they are strongly focused on using other options. An example is found in the Edmonton Public Schools policy on student behaviour and conduct, which states that “unacceptable behaviour *may* be grounds for disciplinary action” (emphasis added) and that consequences may include support for the offender.⁸

Consideration is paid to the individual’s circumstances, even in the case of extreme violence. Teachers participating in this study reported, “Many of the people making decisions have never dealt with these kinds of kids.” This approach leads to the use of quick fixes, such as the common practice of evacuating students to get them away from a violent student, without fully considering the potential disruption and trauma for other students. Thus, as participants noted, policy against aggressive behaviour exists, but the administration of policy may be inconsistent with the goal of promoting a safe environment for all.

Schools have policy and publicize it to their school communities. For example, Ecole St Joseph School, in Whitecourt, posts online a multipage document of division-mandated procedures for maintaining a safe and caring school environment for students.⁹ However, there is no comment about the treatment of teachers. An expectation may exist, but it is not articulated for students and parents in the division policy. This is a notable gap. Promoting teacher safety fosters an overall safe and caring school environment.

In revealing the characteristics of teachers experiencing bullying and violence, the characteristics of perpetrators, the inconsistent implementation of policy, and the requests for training, this study demonstrates the need for further research. In particular, strikingly absent in the participants’ reports are comments on how nonviolent, nonbullying students see violence against teachers. This study focuses on the teachers involved, but how are student bystanders affected? Does violence against teachers affect students who experience the violence vicariously? What are the residual effects of evacuating students out of fear for their safety? What are the effects on education quality when teacher absenteeism results from violence and bullying?

Final Thoughts

It is axiomatic that teachers who are healthy, confident and happy in their work will perform better. The impact of bullying and violence can be grave as they affect health, confidence and happiness—and, in extreme cases, can even lead to loss of life. Other effects include poor human capital development, erosion of societal values and destruction of school reputations. The cost of bullying and violence goes beyond absenteeism to include resource (money) allocation, learning continuity disruption, increased stress for students, and challenges for administrators and other staff. With these multiple negative effects, bullying and violence against teachers must be addressed.

Addressing this issue requires the following:

- *Opening the discussion.* The Association is ideally positioned to do this.
- *Building recognition that violence against teachers is not a teacher problem but, rather, an education problem shared by all participants in the system.* Policy-makers, administrators, parents, teachers and school boards all must be involved and must see the value of the work for themselves.
- *Basing principles and protocols on common values.* These values include safety, security, belonging, order and mutual accountability.

Further research could support and inform discussion, recognition of the issue as an education problem, and the establishment of sound principles and protocols. Research could also provide information to support reducing the frequency of aggression. McMahon et al (2020) see student violence and aggression as a “significant public health concern” (p 116) for which an antecedent–behaviour–consequence review would allow one to “understand behaviour as a function of one’s environment” (p 117) because it would identify both behaviour triggers and consequences. Requests for funding for specialized, on-site support from outside the classroom may be a shared interest of other groups that could support teachers in creating a safer environment.

Research could also provide action frameworks for preventing adverse impacts on teachers’ physical, psychological and teaching-related functioning arising from bullying and violence. Could all school–community groups create parameters for school implementation of policy and even expand access to education about contributing elements, such as microaggression?

Finally, research could identify the full range of options and consequences available and appropriate for dealing with a bullying or violent individual while considering the welfare of all parties involved in any incident.

In addition to calling for further investigation into violence and bullying against teachers, this report makes 11 specific recommendations for addressing the concerns raised by participants in the Alberta study.

Safety in schools has always been a priority. The focus has been the safety of students—and that should not change. However, even as teachers have made efforts to improve school safety and to make schools inclusive, safe and respectful for all students, this study, along with other studies from across Canada, makes clear the need to expand attention to increased safety for teachers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Investigate teachers' knowledge of existing policies—in particular, how these policies are to be accessed and followed in a usable and effective manner.
2. Use the data from this report on correlates of reporting bullying and violence to guide the investigation of teachers' knowledge of policies and their tendencies to report violence.
3. Identify potential explanations for the real or perceived disconnection between front line teachers, administration and higher levels of the system when it comes to responding to incidents of bullying and violence against teachers.
4. Assess the adequacy of existing programs designed to prevent, assess and manage bullying and violence risk against teachers.
5. Use the data from this report on correlates of experiencing bullying and violence to guide the evaluation of training needs.
6. Consider providing additional training to front line teachers on the topics of bullying and violence risk assessment, prevention and management, including but extending beyond de-escalation techniques.
7. Consider providing additional training at both the school and the system levels on adopting, developing and implementing bullying and violence risk assessment, prevention and management programs.
8. Consider providing alternative models of training—in particular, a train-the-trainer or local expert model.
9. Ensure, at a minimum, that teachers are aware of the support and resources available to them if they experience bullying or violence.
10. Evaluate the adequacy of existing support programs and resources available to teachers who have experienced bullying or violence in light of the instances of bullying and violence and their impact reported in the survey. (For example, if one extrapolated from the study's sample of 561, of which 18 per cent reported experiencing physical violence without a weapon in 2018/19, to an Association membership of roughly 40,000, that would mean that roughly 7,200 teachers per year

experience physical violence in Alberta.) Consider increasing and enhancing resources devoted to teachers who experience bullying or violence if the evaluation concludes that additional supports and resources are necessary.

11. Use the data from this report on correlates of experiencing adverse consequences of bullying and violence to guide the evaluation of existing support programs and resources, as well as in the planning of any enhancements or additions to those programs and resources.

Notes

1. "Cyberbullying," PREVNet, www.prevnet.ca/bullying/cyber-bullying/ (accessed October 1, 2020).
2. "School Violence in Canada," iResearchNet (Criminal Justice), <http://criminal-justice.iresearchnet.com/crime/school-violence/school-violence-in-canada/> (accessed October 1, 2020).
3. "Key Information," Ministry of Education, www.alberta.ca/education.aspx (accessed October 1, 2020).
4. *Education Act*, SA 2012, www.qp.alberta.ca/documents/Acts/e00p3.pdf (accessed October 1, 2020).
5. "Bullying Prevention Programs," Public Health Canada, last modified January 12, 2012, www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/bullying/bullying-prevention-programs.html (accessed October 1, 2020).
6. See note 1.
7. See note 4.
8. "Student Behaviour and Conduct," policy HG.BP, Edmonton Public Schools, April 29, 2020, <https://epsb.ca/ourdistrict/policy/h/hg-bp/> (accessed October 1, 2020).
9. Safe and Caring School Protocols, Ecole St Joseph School, www.stjosephschoolwhitecourt.ca/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=1100948&type=d&pREC_ID=1373643 (accessed October 1, 2020).

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