Identifying Key Factors Influencing Violence Directed Toward K-12 Teachers in American Schools

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Abstract

There is an increasing occurrence in school violence (Ricketts, 2007) directed towards teachers (Espelage, 2013) with 80% of teachers reporting at least one victimization experience in the current or past year (American Psychological Association Task Force on Violence Directed Against Teachers, 2011). Therefore, identifying the key factors influencing violence towards K-12 teachers in American schools is important. This research utilizes a sample of 8,101 teachers from the 2011-2012 School and Staffing Survey (SASS). The results indicate 21% reported being threatened with injury and 8.6% reported being physically attacked. The results suggest violence manifests as a result of school climate and environment.

Introduction

In the United States of America, school violence has rapidly increased (Ricketts, 2007) leading to issues in the climate and environment of schools. According to Espelage et al. (2013) "higher rates of violence directed towards teachers were associated with disorganized school structures, negative school climates, lack of administrative and collegial social supports, and high residential crowding" (p.76). Furthermore, Espelage et al. (2013) associated lower rates of violence with "balanced school organizational structures and support systems, clear school disciplinary policies/rules, and positive school relationships". The purpose of this study is to investigate factors in the school environment and teacher's preparation identified by Espelage et al. (2013) that influence school violence against teachers. This research utilizes the 2011-2012 School and Staffing Survey (SASS) to analyze contributing independent variables.

Although limited research is available on this topic, there is evidence that victimization plays a role in recruitment and retention of highly effective teachers (Espelage et al., 2013). Gregory, Cornell, and Fan (2012), noted a supportive school climate is linked to teacher safety. They also recognize the importance of teachers to feel supported and protected by the administration in order to reduce the personal risk of victimization. When teachers become more fearful in the workplace, they in turn may become less committed to their educational mission which leads to having a negative impact on the overall school climate (Roberts et al., 2007).

Literature review

The annual *Indication of School Climate and Safety* reports from the Bureau of Justice Statistics highlight trends in school violence, victimization, student behavior, teacher injury, school climate, disciplinary action taken by schools, and the use of preventative security measures as well as a number of other indicators outside the scope of the present study. While this report is currently in its seventeenth iteration, a review of statistics beginning in the 2007-2008 school year demonstrates the steady, albeit small, increase of the above mentioned indicators. For the purposes of this study, a few indicators are of particular note. In the category of *Nonfatal Student and Teacher Victimization*, "ten percent of elementary teachers and 9 percent of secondary teachers reported being threatened by a student from their school in 2011-2012" (Robers, Kemp, Rathbun, & Morgan, 2014, p. v). This is an increase from the 2007-2008 school

year where eight percent of secondary teachers and seven percent of elementary teachers reported being threatened by their students (Robers, Zhang, and Truman, 2010, p. iv)

Another category of note on the *Indicators of School Crime and Safety* reports is that of School Climate. This category encompasses indicators that examine the presence of gangs and gang related behaviors on school grounds, the reporting patterns of schools to local law enforcement authorities on violent crimes committed on their campuses, the occurrence and prevalence of bullying –verbal, written, and cyberbullying; the use of hate speech and graffiti, and teacher reports of student misbehavior and the perceived impact this misbehavior has on the teaching and learning environment. While all of these indicators are meritorious, those of most importance to this study are the teacher reports of student misbehavior and the patterns of collaboration between school officials and law enforcement. The 2013 report states that "about 38 percent of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that student misbehavior interfered with their teaching" (Robers, Kemp, Rathbun, & Morgan, 2014, p. vi). This is an increase from the 2007-2008 school year where 34 percent of teachers reported this interference (Robers, Zhang, and Truman, 2010, p. v).

According to Ricketts (2007, p.49), school violence is defined as "any behavior that violates a school's educational mission or climate of respect or jeopardizes the intent of that school to be free of aggression against persons or property, drugs, weapons, disruptions, and disorder." Threats and harmful actions that impact teachers' perception of school safety range from verbal abuse to physical assault and injury (Gregory, Cornell, Fan, 2012). Focusing in the most important forms of violence directed toward teachers such as threatening to injure and physical attack recent national studies revealed that 80% of teachers reported at least one victimization experience in the current or past year and 94% reported being victimized by students. Specifically, these studies conducted by the American Psychological Association Task Force on Violence Directed Against Teachers (2011) in 48 states with 2,998 K-12 teachers and resulted that the target group of teachers that easily can be victimized has specific characteristics. On average, teachers were 46.4 years old, were female (83.5%), and taught for 16.9 years.

The remainder of the literature examined covering a variety of perspectives on school violence, victimization, teacher preparation, and strategies for responding to and preventing

school violence repeated two major themes: professional development and mentoring, and school-wide interventions and supports. Each of these will be explored in greater depth.

Professional Development and Mentoring

Several researchers investigated the violence that K-12 teachers experience in school classrooms. According to Alvarez (2007), teacher preparation is a factor that influences teachers' responses to classroom aggression. The results from 121 teachers in 11 public schools confirmed that prior training is very important for teachers in supporting classroom management in order to decrease phenomena of student aggression against teachers at schools. While Alvarez discusses the need for training of teachers prior to their beginning in classrooms, ongoing professional development for currently practicing teachers is critical as teacher victimization can have numerous physical, emotional, and psychological consequences; potentially created strained interpersonal relationships in both the home and school (De Vos & Kirsten, 2015).

Although examining teacher professional development in an international setting, Rojas-Flores, et al (2015) explicitly discuss the need for teacher professional development focused on educating teachers on the necessity of self-care, both in standard classroom functioning as well as times of crisis. The authors note that training focused on self-care should be delivered not only prior to the beginning of a school year, but also on an on-going basis so that "new and already established teachers develop an understanding of how to cope with their own trauma-related distress" (p. 108). Rojas-Flores, et al (2015) also strongly suggest the use of formal and informal support groups, recommending the use of formal groups organized and facilitated by a mental health professional, and informal support networks for teachers to "discuss their coping strategies and process reactions to violence among their students" (p.108).

While self-care and peer support through networks and support groups is essential for maintaining personal well-being in response to classroom violence, professional development and mentoring can also be powerful tools to teach and learn strategies on how to de-escalate and mediate acts of violence in the classroom (Ozfidan, & Ugurlu, 2015). Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen (2013) studied the effects of a relatively brief training session, roughly two hours in length, focused on building empathy and self-efficacy in teacher. This training was specifically geared towards teacher responses to anti-LGBT bullying and harassment. The results of this study showed that even a short professional development training session with teachers allowed

for greater self-efficacy and awareness in intervening among students engaging in verbal and written bullying of LGBT students. Additionally, teachers showed an increased awareness of the importance of intervening in this kind of bullying as well as increased self-efficacy in their "ability to promote an inclusive environment for LGBT students" (p. 89). Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen's study is imperative to note, as these results were seen after only two, two-hour sessions of training with teachers. These sessions included role-playing scenarios, modeling and practicing of intervention strategies, and were "specifically focused on the educators' role in addressing anti-LGBT bullying, harassment, name-calling, and remarks" (p. 91); demonstrating that a small number of highly focused training sessions are capable of producing beneficial results in both teacher and student behaviors.

School-Wide Interventions and Supports

Student misbehavior in classrooms impacts both teaching and learning for students and teachers alike. In order for teachers to create and maintain a productive classroom setting and bring the focus back to teaching and learning, classroom management strategies are necessary to decrease disruption and increase compliance. A variety of classroom management programs combine management techniques and verbal intervention strategies that allow teachers and staff to effectively manage and diffuse disruptive student behavior. Prevention is a critical factor in reducing incidents and managing behaviors before they escalate. Intervention strategies are crucial to keeping students, faculty, and school visitors' safe in moments of crisis.

It is crucial, from a student perspective, to be motivated and learn something in class (Kitzmiller, 2013). Students' violent behavior and verbal outbursts can often represent a form of resistance against teachers who avoid teaching students' skills that are essential to future success (Fine & Weis, 2003). When teachers are not prepared to teach a lesson and have no lesson plan, a chaotic climate can be easily observed (Kitzmiller, 2013). Teachers believe that weak school leadership does not enforce the rules and norms of the school, as multiple teachers claimed that it is more common for administrators to reprimand teachers for minor infractions, than to reprimand students engaged in destructive and violent behaviors (Kitzmiller, 2013). Many teachers also fear the loss of their authority by reprimanding student misbehavior, and therefore becoming the next target of student violence and future victimization. Furthermore, once a teacher abdicates his or her power, it is virtually impossible to regain it (Arendt, 1969; Davies, 2004; Hemmings, 2003;

Metz, 1978; Pace & Hemmings, 2006). Kitzmiller (2013) concludes by noting that a teacher who gives students real, but limited, power and authority in the classroom, eventually, legitimizes their own authority as the teacher.

Effective classroom management is one of the most important components to increase the provision of quality instruction, and to decrease student misbehavior, and distraction from schoolwork (Ozfidan, Cavlazoglu, Burlbaw, & Aydin, 2017). One of the most stressful parts of many teacher's professional lives is to find the most effective management techniques that encourage and reinforce behavioral changes and prevent the occurrence of classroom discipline problems (Hart, Wearing, & Conn, 1995). In a study of 592 primary students and 2938 secondary students in Australia, Lewis (2001) reported that when teachers employ classroom strategies of allowing decision making, recognition and discussion with misbehaving students, students become more responsible and less aggressive. Findings from 397 junior high school teachers in Vietnam indicate that teachers who employ more aggression and punishment techniques towards student misbehavior resulted in students who were distracted and unfocused on schoolwork, less responsible, and more aggressive (Van Dat, 2016; Kennedy, 1996). Alternative management schemes require teachers to create a caring, deeply engaged class-room community with classroom rules that both teachers and students have accepted and agreed to follow. Building empathy and reinforcing positive behaviors among misbehaving students allows for the impact of their behavior on others to be more fully recognized and understood, and encourages students to make more appropriate behavioral choices.

According to Vettenburg, (2002), teacher's feeling unsafe in front of their classes tend to show a reduced commitment to their educational task and easily can be victimized. Thus, implementing strategies that can enhance teacher's autonomy and self-efficacy we can create a more positive classroom environment. The feeling of unsafety is related with the social, physical and organizational climate in which the teachers work–such as how well organized the school is and how much support they feel from administration (Roberts et al., 2007). Only, if we school resources, decrease class sizes, and provide continual support, training, and guidance for teachers we can create a more supportive student–teacher relationships (Benhorin & McMahon, 2008). Thus, the schools in order to predict or prevent violence should adopt specific policies and

procedures that provide the formal training, professional collaboration, supervision, and support resources needed to implement violence prevention (McAdams III & Foster, 2008).

Research questions:

1. What is the scale of school threats and violence in American schools?
2. What are the key factors affecting a reduction in schools threats and violence in American schools?

Methods

The data used in this analysis was derived from 37,319 participant responses to the 2011-2012 School and Staffing Survey (SASS) Teacher Questionnaire. The Institute of Educational Science's National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) uses the SASS teacher questionnaire on a large sample of public and private K-12 teachers across the U.S. to gather insight into teachers' perceptions about the nature of their experiences in today's classrooms. The NCES makes this data available to educational researchers to inform policy and shape the future of institutional support for the teaching profession.

Participants

A number of diverse educational professionals respond to the SASS Teacher Questionnaire, however, for the purpose of this study, we removed any participants that were not full time certified classroom teachers. This data reduction process eliminated paraprofessionals, non-certified teachers and part-time teachers from the overall sample. The final sample demographics can be seen in the table below:

Table 1. Sample Demographics

Male	n=11700 (31.4%)
Female	n=25619 (68.6%)
White	n=31998 (85.7%)
Hispanic	n=1922 (5.2%)
African American	n=2022 (5.4%)
Other *	n=1377 (3.6%)
Elementary (P-5)	n=6776 (18.2%)

Middle Grades (6-8)	n=10334 (27.7%)
High School (9-12)	n=15843 (42.5%)
Combined (K-12)	n=4366 (11.7%)
Public (including charter)	
Private	
Urban	n=8085 (21.7%)
Suburban	n=10245 (27.5%)
Town	n=6150 (16.5%)
Rural	n=12839 (34.4%)
Total Sample	n=37319 (100%)

Note: Other includes Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American

The sample is clearly weighted in ethnicity, gender and level towards white (85.7%), female (68.6%), and high school teachers (42.5%) respectively. This unequal distribution within the sample is a limitation on findings and will be taken into consideration with regards to further analysis.

Descriptive Statistics

Once the sample was reduced to include only relevant participants for the study, descriptive statistics were used to identify full time classroom teachers who reported experiencing violent environments through threats or direct attacks. Within each subgroup (threatened or attacked), differences were compared by currency (within 12 months or total experience) and by frequency of reported experiences. Reported frequency was limited to 99 incidences by the structure of the survey instrument.

Table 2. Descriptive Categories

Threatened (T0475)	Ever threatened (1,2)	n=8101 (21.7%)
	Within 12 months (1,2)	n=3642 (9.8%)
	Number of threats (#)	0-99
Attacked (T0478)	Ever attacked (1,2)	n=3226 (8.6%)
	Within 12 months (1,2)	n=1516 (4.1%)
	Number of attacks (#)	0-99

Inferential Statistics

Differences between means and standard deviations related to preparedness and administrative support were compared through t-tests and analyses of variance (ANOVA). Cohen's d was used to calculate effect size according to Lipsey, & Wilson, (2001, p.147)

Results

Based on our analysis, descriptive statistics show of the 37,319 participants, 8,101 (21%) or approximately 1 in 5 teachers reported they have ever been threatened with injury within their school. Of those teachers, 3,642 (9.8%) or 1 in 10 said they have been threatened within the last 12 months (Figure 3), which equates to an average of 4.98 (SD 12.368) threats per teacher ranging from 1,367 teachers reporting one case of being threatened to 38 teachers reporting 99 or more cases of being threatened by a student(s). 75 teachers reported being threatened 50 times or more (Figure 4).
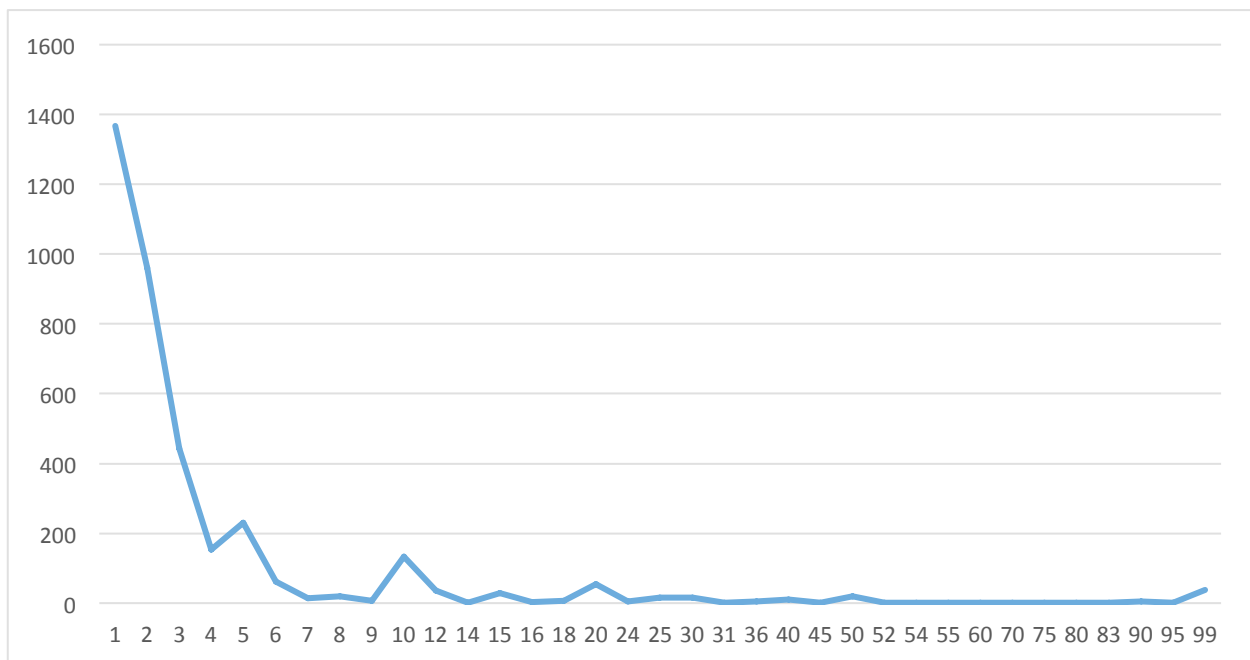

Figure 3. Teachers threatened injury by a student in the past 12 months, 1-99 times.
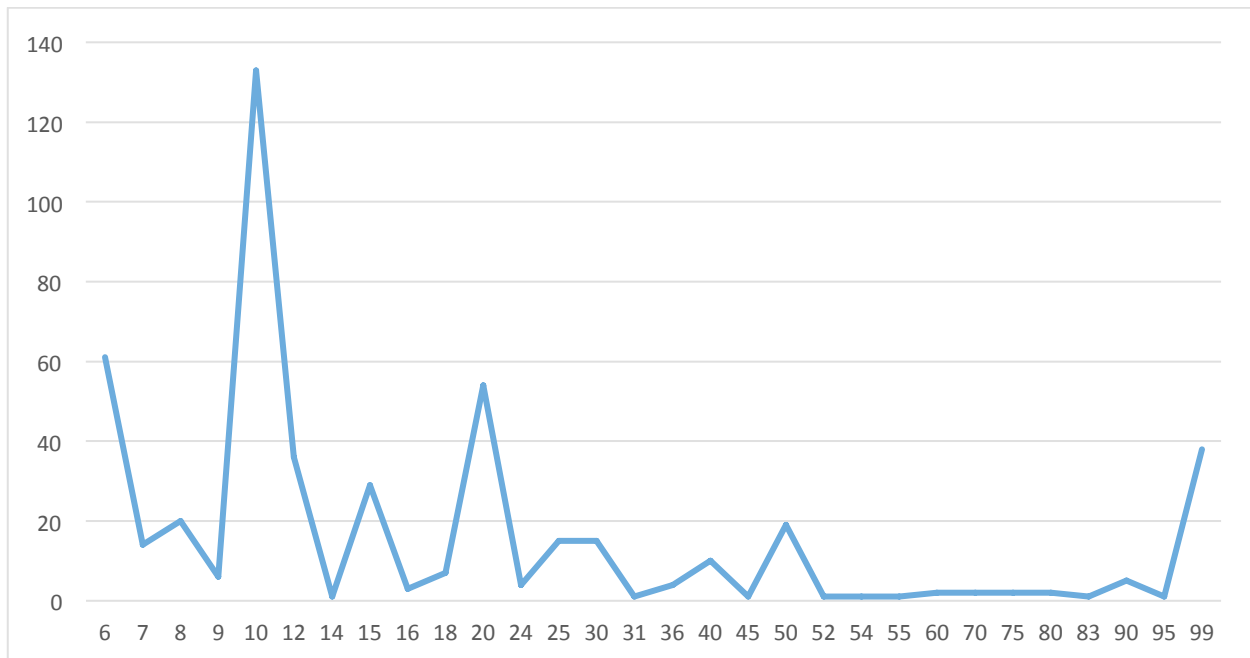
Figure 4. Teachers threatened injury by a student in the past 12 months, 6-99 times.

More concerning, 3,226 teachers (8.6%) reported they had been physically attacked ever within their school. Of those teachers, 1,516 (4.1%) or 1 in 20 were attacked at school within the last 12 months, which equates to an average of 5.93 (SD 13.518) attacks per teacher ranging from 649 teachers reporting one attack to 17 teachers reporting 99 or more attacks (figure 5). 42 teachers reported being attached 50 times or more (Figure 6). This clearly demonstrates school violence is an issue which affects many teachers and in some cases is an extremely concerning safety concern for others.
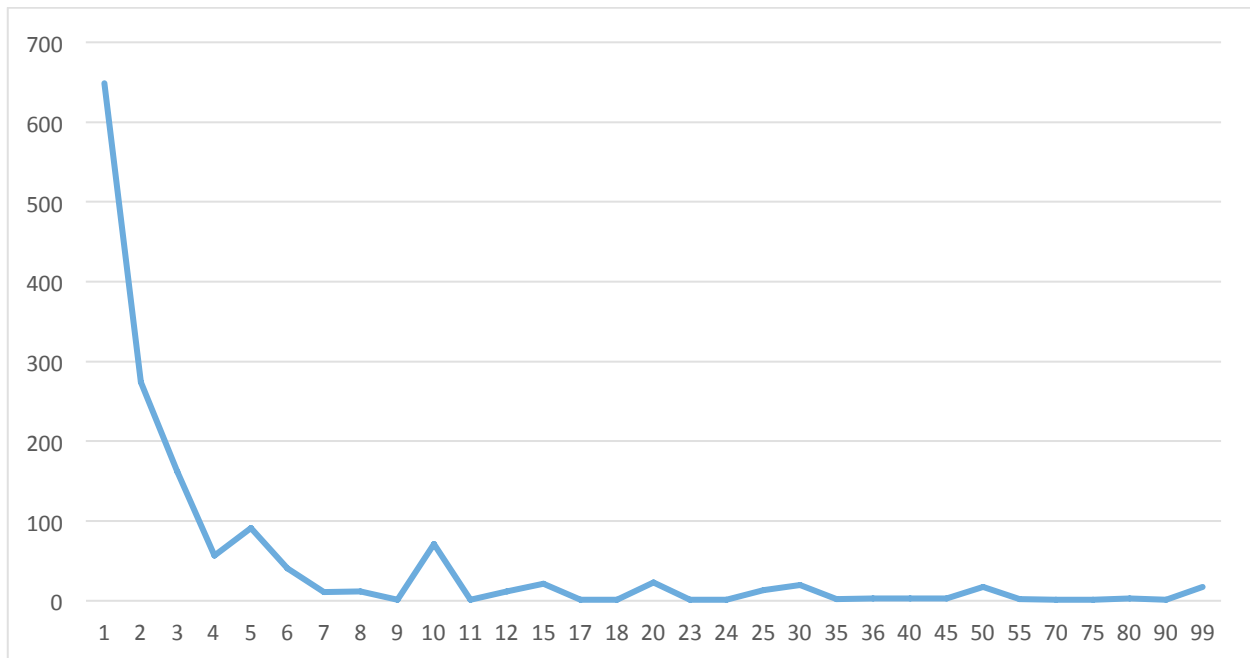
Figure 5. Teachers physically attacked by a student in the past 12 months, 1-99 times.
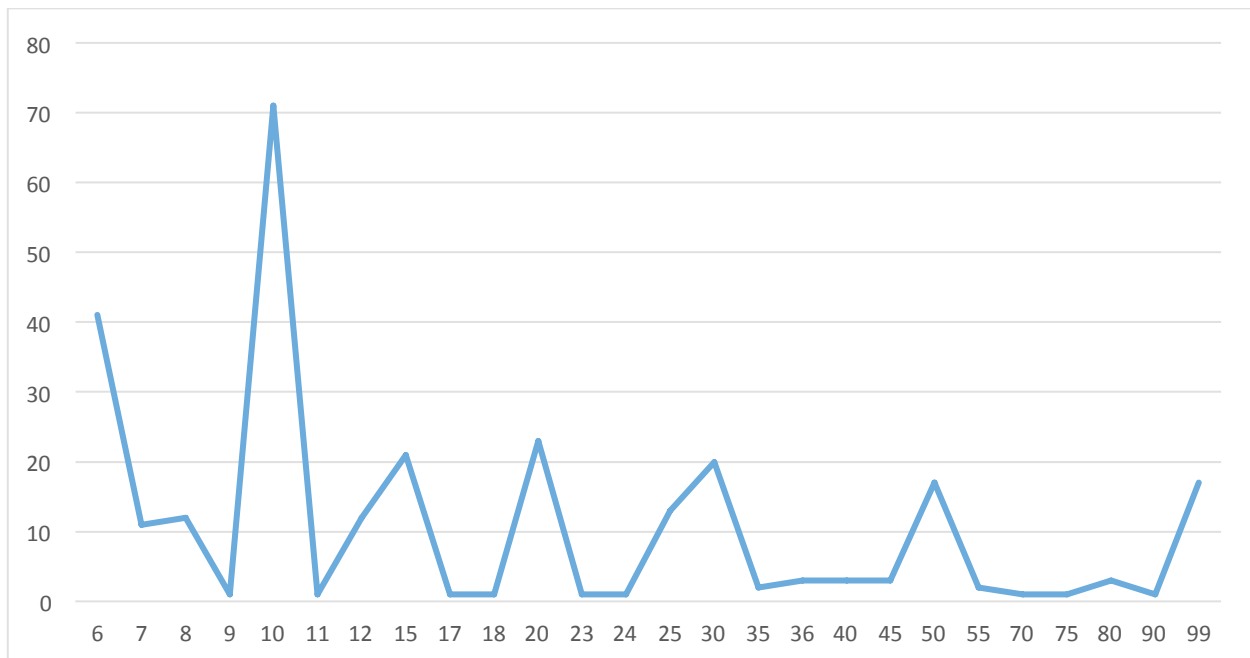

Figure 6. Teachers physically attacked by a student in the past 12 months, 6-99 times.

Based on an independent samples t test analysis, teacher's position, main activity, class organization, highest degree level, taking graduate or undergraduate courses that focused solely on teaching methods or teaching strategies, and practice or student teaching were all found to not

to have a significant impact on threats (table 3) or attacks (table 4) of teachers. Also students with limited-English proficiency or English-language learners (ELLs), and students on Individual Education Programs (IEP) showed no significant difference for threats or attacks towards teachers than their peers.

Table 3. Significant results based on threats towards teachers. Cronbach's Alpha .812.

Threatened (n1=8101) n2=29,218	Mean Treatment	SD Treatment	Mean Control	SD Control	T score	Effect Size
Handling a range of classroom management or discipline situations	5.88	4.252	5.45	4.571	7.922	0.09
Teachers who participated in induction programs	6.15	3.690	5.80	3.924	7.444	0.09
Received regular supportive communication with the principal, other administrator, or department chair	6.13	3.731	5.80	3.939	7.119	0.08
Worked closely with a mentor teacher	6.13	3.745	5.78	3.968	7.280	0.08
Received professional development	1.50	0.500	1.59	0.491	14.648	0.18
A greater level of autonomy: Select teaching techniques	3.49	0.744	3.65	0.620	17.523	0.25
A greater level of autonomy: Discipline Students	3.19	0.828	3.44	0.697	25.191	0.35
A greater level of autonomy: Determine amount of homework	3.58	0.720	3.70	0.602	13.294	0.19
Job satisfaction	1.83	0.833	1.52	0.696	30.850	0.43
Access to resources	2.06	0.931	1.78	0.832	24.944	0.33
Support in maintaining the rules	2.53	0.939	2.20	0.884	28.535	0.37

However, school-based interventions such as handling a range of classroom management or discipline situations did make a significant difference on reducing the number of threats and attacks on teachers who felt they were very well prepared. Teachers who participated in induction programs, received regular supportive communication with the principal, other administrator, or department chair, worked closely with a mentor teacher, received professional development, a formal evaluation, a greater level of autonomy, job satisfaction, access to

resources, and support in maintaining the rules all stated significantly fewer instances of student threats or attacks in their school.

Table 4. Significant results based on attacks towards teachers. Cronbach's Alpha .812.

Attacked (n1=3,226) n2=34,093, N=37,319	Mean Treatment	SD Treatment	Mean Control	SD Control	T score	Effect Size
Handling a range of classroom management or discipline situations	5.88	4.269	5.51	4.528	4.7.17	0.08
Teachers who participated in induction programs	6.17	3.674	5.85	3.894	4.707	0.08
Received regular supportive communication with the principal, other administrator, or department chair	6.16	3.710	5.84	3.913	4.562	0.08
Worked closely with a mentor teacher	6.15	3.714	5.83	3.941	4.743	0.07
Received professional development	1.44	0.497	1.59	0.493	15.76	0.3
A greater level of autonomy: Select teaching techniques	3.46	0.757	3.63	0.639	12.104	0.26
A greater level of autonomy: Discipline Students	3.28	0.812	3.40	0.726	8.327	0.16
A greater level of autonomy: Determine amount of homework	3.57	0.732	3.68	0.620	8.190	0.17
Job satisfaction	1.77	0.832	1.57	0.727	13.058	0.27
Access to resources	2.04	0.945	1.82	0.852	12.612	0.25
Support in maintaining the rules	2.34	0.937	2.26	0.903	4.133	0.08

Finally, threats towards teachers begins to taper off at age 40, whereas attacks towards teachers is focused on teacher between the age of 25 and 34 suggesting policy should be focused on this age group.

Conclusion

Factors affecting school violence would appear to be related to the school climate and environment rather than the students or the teachers. Therefore, it is critical a deeper understanding of how school violence manifests as a result of school climate and environment. This research illuminates the need for comprehensive and continued development and supervision of teachers at all stages of their career and not only in their induction year. Also, a deeper understanding into the persistent abuse of a few teachers and the effect this abuse has on

teacher mental health and attrition. This research would suggest the possible existence of highly negative school environments, or sick schools.

Educational or scientific importance of the study

There has been limited research conducted employing teachers' voices as a source of information to inform school violence policy, but rather it usually relies on the views of administrators (Ricketts, 2007). To address teachers' voices, the 2011-2012 School and Staffing Survey is used in this study.

Further Research

There are a plethora of further research opportunities stemming from this research, however, the most pertinent would include a State-by-State demographic analysis of threat and attach density to gain a better understanding of the locality of school violence. The second vein of future research is a longitudinal analysis to incorporate previous SASS data. Is the phenomena of school violence increasing or decreasing, and is this affecting teacher recruitment and retention. The third avenue of future research may include a factor analysis to better understand the amount of variance accounted for by the factors analyzed in their study. Finally, the theory of sick schools needs a framework and development.

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