

CYPE(6)-24-22 - Paper to note 5

Information submitted by UNISON in response to the letter sent on the 26 September about sexual harassment of school staff.

Sexual harassment of female school staff

UNISON Cymru Wales submission to Senedd Children, Young People and Education Committee inquiry, November 2022

About UNISON Cymru Wales

UNISON is the UK's largest trade union organising and representing 1.3 million public sector workers UK wide, including 100,000 public sector workers across Wales.

Our members, 85 per cent of whom are women, work in the delivery of public services through direct public sector provision, private and voluntary contractors providing public services, and in the essential utilities. They include frontline staff and managers working full or part-time in public administration, local authorities, health and social care, the police and justice service, universities, colleges and schools, the electricity, gas, environment and water industries, transport, and in the voluntary and community sectors.

UNISON Cymru Wales represents thousands of school support staff including teaching and learning support assistants, reception and office staff, kitchen and catering staff, midday supervisors, caretakers, pastoral care, technicians and librarians. These school staff are predominantly female. This submission paper is shaped by their experience.

The issue of safety of school support staff and concerns about their security on school premises is very relevant. The Committee's inquiry into sexual harassment of female staff sits alongside the work UNISON has been involved in on violence and aggression faced by teaching and classroom assistants in across the UK.

We also wanted to support the Committee's investigations by providing detailed feedback on how support staff in Wales feel about these issues and surveyed our members in October.

Summary of UNISON position

School support staff are often referred to as 'unsung heroes' of our schools. They perform a vital role which makes our schools the success they are, but the majority

are low-paid women who suffer an institutional discrimination that belittles their role. This can have a serious impact on how they feel about reporting incidences of violence and sexual harassment, how schools might treat such complaints from them and how these members of staff are supported.

The evidence we provide in this paper shows school support staff are overwhelming worried about violent behaviour in their job in schools (70% of respondents to our survey said they were worried about this). Staff are frequently verbally abused and violent incidents and injuries to staff are commonplace, yet staff do not feel supported by their headteachers and nor have many been given training on how to deal with violent situations.

While violent behaviour is an everyday occurrence across Welsh schools, support staff report a much lower incidence of sexual harassment in the workplace, though of course, it is no less serious. As we will detail later, 11% of school support staff respondents had experienced sexual harassment at work, the most common being verbal harassment followed by physical harassment. Of those who had suffered harassment, the perpetrator in the majority of cases was a pupil or learner.

School support staff suffering sexual harassment said they would feel much more confident about reporting this to their headteacher and more confident that it would be dealt with appropriately, than when a violent incident occurs.

The consequences of violent pupil behaviour can be grave for the mental and physical health of support staff. Many teaching assistants describe a feeling of dread of going into school each morning fearing they will be subject to violence and aggression. They might suffer panic attacks and many talk of being plagued by anxiety so much that it disturbs their sleep.

This worry is aggravated because they feel unsupported by headteachers and the general perception in school that violence is to be endured as a normal part of the working culture.

Anxiety is further compounded because support staff say many schools either don't have protocols for dealing with aggressive children or don't make support staff aware of them and don't provide staff with training to de-escalate situations and protect themselves.

Schools must have robust policies around violence and sexual harassment of staff and make pupils and colleagues aware that this will not be tolerated in any way.

In particular, UNISON makes three urgent recommendations: improve the reporting process around attacks, provide staff with medical and psychological support and

ensure they don't have to continue working with the young person who's just assaulted/harassed them.

Role of teaching assistants

Without doubt, schools could not survive without teaching assistants. They help to support Special Educational Needs children and those underperforming; help teachers to cope with big classes and release teachers for preparation time and help those with English as an Additional Language, amongst other things.

It is in the interests of schools therefore to prioritise the safety and well-being of school support staff as a way of guaranteeing their school is a high-performing one.

Most of the evidence gathered by UNISON was from teaching assistants and the frightening testimonies we hear from them in Wales every day, clearly shows that schools are not doing enough in this area. Teaching assistants are extremely worried about violent behaviour in their job.

Academic report into the violence and aggression faced by teaching assistants in the UK

UNISON at a UK level contributed to a recently published academic study by University of Roehampton criminologist, Dr Amanda Holt, into the violence and aggression faced by teaching and classroom assistants in Wales, England and Scotland – the first analysis of its kind (extensive data already exists into pupil-on-pupil violence and aggression towards teachers and senior managers.)

Dr Amanda Holt led the qualitative research that involved in-depth interviews with 16 teaching and classroom assistants. UNISON helped recruit the support staff who took part in the research.

All described being the target of student aggression in a range of ways, including being hit in the face, punched, kicked and bitten. Researchers found that in several cases staff reported receiving death threats from pupils. 53% of teaching assistants had experienced physical violence from students in the previous year.

Physical injuries included cuts, a black eye, a dislocated thumb, a broken finger and ripped ligaments. Staff also reported a range of psychological problems, including stress, anxiety and depression. Two workers were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

The report also noted that the response of schools to attacks was sometimes inadequate. Teaching assistants felt the message from their employers was that it

was their job to manage pupil violence. This, combined with their low status, normalised violence against them.

The report includes guidance on the steps schools should take to better protect teaching assistants in future. UNISON is rolling out the new advice about dealing with violent behaviour.

Dr Holt said: "For the first time there's an understanding of the ferocity of attacks on teaching assistants and their devastating physical and mental toll.

"This knowledge will help schools better understand and improve their response to violent behaviour by pupils. Setting out the steps every school should take to protect staff and support them in the aftermath of an attack is an important first step.

"This raises big questions about the expectation of schools, and in some cases insistence, that teaching assistants should be the first line of defence against pupils who display violent or aggressive behaviour.

"With the profession dominated by women, forcing them to become classroom enforcers could do long-term harm. Combined with the role's lack of professional status, this risks creating an environment where violence becomes normal, particularly towards women. As pupils become adults this worrying development could have serious ramifications for society."

The Holt report is submitted by UNISON alongside our evidence to the Committee.

UNISON Cymru Wales survey of teaching assistants

As the main trade union representing school support staff in Wales, we wanted to support the Committee's investigations by providing detailed feedback on how support staff feel about these issues.

We launched a survey of UNISON school support staff on 18 October 2022 which closed on 27 October. 212 members, across primary, secondary and special schools, 3-16 learning community, pupil referral units, completed our survey. The overwhelming majority of respondents were teaching assistants.

The key findings are summarised below.

Key survey data

Q1. Are you worried about violent behaviour in your job?

- 70% (149 people) said 'yes'

Q2. How frequently have you personally experienced violence at work in the past 12 months?

- 16.8% experience verbal abuse at least daily; 28.8% experience verbal abuse at least weekly
- 10.7% experience threats at least daily; 20.1% experience threats at least weekly
- 10.6% experience assaults at least daily; 15.2% experience assault at least weekly

Q3. How often do you observe violent incidents towards staff in your school?

- 70 people observe violent incidents at least daily
- 58 people observe violent incidents at least weekly

Q4. If you have been assaulted, what behaviours did this include? Tick all that apply

- Pushing – 105 people
- Kicking – 121 people
- Punching – 92
- Throwing of object/ furniture – 127 people
- Spitting – 84 people
- Biting – 80 people
- Scratching – 76 people
- Attacked with a weapon – 27 people
- Verbally – 117 people
- Other – 22 people

Q5. Have you ever suffered an injury as a result of violence/physical abuse at your school?

- 8% said 'yes, major injury requiring medical assistance'
- 43% said 'yes, minor injury requiring first aid'

Q6. If you have experienced a violent incident, did you feel supported by your head teacher/line manager?

- 41% said 'no'

Q7. Respondents were asked if violent behaviour from pupils had an impact on your health and wellbeing, in what ways? Only a sample is given below. Each bullet-point denotes a different respondent.

- It caused me to have anxiety about going to work & also made my asthma a lot worse due to the stress & anxiety of being attacked every time I was in the class with the child to the point I had to take 6 weeks off work.
- *My confidence and self esteem has been effected, questioning if I am in some way doing something that is provoking behaviour*
- Just recently I had a table thrown at me, damaging my arm and resulting in so far three weeks off.
- *Working in a special needs school it comes with part of the job but I don't feel there is enough support after incidents. Staff shortages and inexperienced staff cause behaviours to be worse. We are just expected to get on with it as it's a part of the job without actual support and support of our wellbeing. I feel overworked, under paid and under appreciated.*
- Yes scared to work with individuals on a daily basis. Been put in the same class as an individual who has bitten, kicked pushed me.
- *I am very wary of children approaching me from behind and have become more nervous at home when family comes quietly near me*
- Drained, stressed, unable to complete daily tasks. Miserable in my role. On high alert constantly, waiting for next attack
- *Yes. Went in sick leave for six months. Couldn't cope. Was going through a difficult time at home and then daily upset in work and felt like I wasn't supported at all.*
- Don't want to come to Work. Worry that if you speak up that they'll listen and won't react badly. Worry if you'll be supported for telling pupils to stop.
- *It made me leave that school and job for something I didn't want to do. I hid in toilets as much as I could and became miserable at home which damaged my relationship with my partner*
- Absolutely it has, it has impacted both my health and wellbeing. I am currently still off work from my last attack and in awful pain. Dreams where I'm woken up by the pupil or can't sleep for it running through my mind.
- *Yes. Going to school every day feeling anxious in case a child becomes aggressive, physically or verbally abusive. Lack of acknowledgment or support from parents - denial of behaviours. TAs (Teaching Assistants) just being left to deal with poor behaviours.*
- Has encouraged me to look for employment outside of the education sector.
- *Yes. I have been attacked several times by ALN (Additional Learning Needs) students. One time was particularly bad and I had to go to A&E to get my nose and eye socket x-rayed.*
- Made me feel inadequate and no good at my job. Dreaded going into work, also felt I was failing the pupil involved and the other pupils in the class.

- *I would come home after work and take my frustration out on my children. Shouting at them for silly things, having no tolerance towards them etc.*
- Yes, started having panic attacks and unable to sleep
- *Feeling tired, no energy to complete family activities, having to hide marks & bruises from husband & own children*
- Yes, in the last year I have had panic attacks, I have also been having chest pains and other symptoms, which medical professionals have told me is likely due to the stressful nature of my job. This term I often feel anxious and I am losing weight as I have lost my appetite.
- *Yes I ended up in A&E twice! Once with a facial injury that needed treatment. Multiple permanent scars from being bitten and scratched, It left me feeling nervous about coming to work and had a negative effect on my wellbeing, I was left feeling stressed and anxious daily.*
- Yes, I feel like a sitting duck in my school because assaults/threats towards support staff are often turned back on us by SMT (Senior Management Team) and we are made to feel it is our fault even though there are no clear policies and procedures we can refer to of what to do when such serious incidents occur such as when a pupil is in possession of a weapon. I personally have been reprimanded by SMT recently for asking an open question to colleagues as to why wasn't a pupil dealt with in a particular way when in possession of a weapon being unaware at the time of the actual procedure.
- *I don't go to work to be a battering ram for a child to kick and lash out at and keep getting told that tomorrow is another day. It brings in anxiety and a feeling of not wanting to go to work*
- Yes it made me dread going to work and fear serious injury
- *Yes. We are seeing staff hit, kicked, elbowed, pushed sometimes deliberately, sometimes when breaking up fights but it's becoming so regular you can't help but worry. Starting to not feel safe there anymore and this is a standard comp, not a special school or PRU (Pupil Referral Unit).*

Q8. Is there a clear protocol at your school for reporting a violent incident towards staff?

- 16% said 'no'
- 21% said 'don't know'

Q9. Have you seen a risk assessment or behaviour plan for any of the learners you work with where this is required?

- 48% said 'no'

Q10. Is the risk assessment/behaviour plan updated following an incident?

- 11% said 'no'
- 49% said 'don't know'

Q11. Does your school have policies, risk assessments and control measures in place?

- 5% said 'no'
- 33% said 'don't know'

Q12. Have you been given training on how to deal with violent situations?

- 46% said 'no'

Q13. Respondents were given the opportunity to describe measures that their school has taken to deal with violence in their workplace. Only a sample is given below. Each bullet-point denotes a different respondent.

- Tried to exclude pupils but LEA (Local Education Authority) made school have them back
- "It's part of the job"
- There are policies and measures in place, but the headteacher does not follow them so the whole process does not work. It is only when the headteacher is on the receiving end that they do anything about it. Support staff are not considered at all.
- *Referred child to educational psychologist.*
- Since I and another colleague have been signed off sick by Dr we have been made aware of violence policies and violence at work forms
- *Pupil was removed for a time period but has returned, behaviour is still a problem.*
- Some avoidance tactics that rarely work.
- *Yes. Reported to Behaviour Support but there is rarely any assistance available*
- Photos of injuries are sent to county as far as I know!
- *Yes, told to ignore behaviour and use team teach to prevent attacks. However, this is almost impossible due to the speed of the children and violent behaviour towards us.*
- No, other than discussing it. Such discussions imply that we must 'just get on with it'.

- *We have received Team Teach training which focused on how to safely remove a pupil from a situation, but I do not feel that is enough to help us in knowing how to deescalate situations or cope with the physical harm and emotional stress these instances cause to staff.*
- Exclusions - however staff have dealt with way too many incidents before this happens and then children are being allowed back, leaving staff feeling scared of a recurrence. Staff are being physically and verbally abused on an hourly basis, daily - behaviour has a significant negative affect on the learning of the rest of the children who aren't getting an education they deserve as a result.
- *Most children have individual plans, with positive handling protocols and triggers/diffusers etc. However not all staff are given these documents.*
- No. Staff don't feel enough is done, regularly there are incidents that staff feel warrant permanent exclusion but the council/challenge adviser apparently make this incredibly difficult. We'll be a news story before long, knives will be next but sadly until something truly awful and "newsworthy" occurs we're just expected to carry on.

Q14. Respondents were asked what else could be done to tackle the problem of violence against staff in their school and to make staff feel better supported? Only a sample is given below. Each bullet-point denotes a different respondent.

- Tougher sanctions against perpetrators
- *Give clear consequences, helping by removing the child from the situation so that staff that have been shown violence don't have to work with the child again straight after the incident. Quicker referrals & diagnosis, more staff to share to load & teachers stepping in to help instead of leaving low paid TAs to be punching bags. Not expecting TAs to do break and lunch duty with the child all the time as this feels isolating & you don't have time to debrief or seek emotional support & reassurance from other staff.*
- More support for staff's well-being. Better communication between all staff following an incident & for it to be constant across the school. Better support for special support officers who are with the pupils every moment of the day apart from 30 minute break
- *To have an experienced staff team with the most challenging pupils.*
- Giving us a good amount of trained staff and a good line manager and better pay

- *To know that the child and parents will be dealt with appropriately instead of going for a cup of tea and a break from class with the head then returned to class half hour later.*
- Time for staff to recover after an assault, rather than made to go straight back to pupil with no consequence for child. Parents made aware of violent attacks, consider what other provisions are needed for violent children.
- *Being able to talk openly about it with a line manager and a plan put into place to help cope with these situations*
- Appropriate training. A clear plan of how certain young people are to be managed so that all members of staff are on the same page. Regular check in meetings with line managers to express staff concerns. To be listened to and out feelings and thoughts to be taken notice of.
- *More staff employed and more assistance from the LA*
- More training and specialist senior management responsibilities, as it often feels that TA's (the poorest paid) are left to deal with issues. It's understandable that teachers have to remain in class as there is often a full class of children that need supervision and sometimes maybe upset too, however there needs to be a designated, specialist trained member of senior management available at all times, who is called upon as a matter of standard policy (as this takes the responsibility to make that call off TA's) when a pupil is behaving violently.
- *More and more children are being refused 1:1 support in school when they clearly need it. I believe that this would greatly decrease the amount of violent situations as there would be a designated person for the child who would be able to intervene and potentially stop the situation from escalating*
- There should be a clear plan in place for behaviour and it should be followed consistently for every child and for every member of staff abused, staff should also be listened to, we should have the right to go to work and not be stressed about what we are going to have to face. My setting is mainstream but our SLT (Senior Leadership Team) seem to think that if a child is ALN or has an autism diagnosis that it is okay for them to attack you and you shouldn't complain as it is your job.
- *More consequences for violence, suitable staffing levels*
- There is a need for more funding or staff to work with children who require such support. Currently, teachers and support staff are constantly supporting these children on a daily basis alongside the class. Where most situations, 2 members of staff are required to help regulate and support children. This leaves the other children without the support they need, resulting in many cancelled interventions, lesson activities and daily support. Also the staff members are drained from the daily (in our case) behaviours.
- *There needs to be more TAs for support. We deserve better pay. The risks and demands do not fit the pay we get.*

- To be included in the process moving forward and be updated on any reports that are submitted. Head teacher at times does nothing.

Q15. Have you ever experienced sexual harassment at work?

"Sexual harassment, as defined by the Equality Act 2010, is when a person engages in unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature, whether verbal, non-verbal or physical, that creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive working environment."

- 87% said 'no' (184 people)
- 11% said 'yes' (24 people)
- 1% said 'don't know' (3 people)

Q16. What form of sexual harassment have you experienced at work? Please tick all that apply

- Physical (for example unwelcome touching, hugging, invasion of personal space) – 11 people
- Verbal (for example inappropriate jokes, comments about your appearance, invitations on a date, questions about your private life) – 19 people
- Visual (for example, sexual gestures, staring, winking) – 6 people
- Sexual assault (for example unwanted kissing, sexual touching, performing a sexual act) – 2 people
- Cyber (for example inappropriate emails, texts or phone calls) – 2 people

Q18. When was the last time you experienced sexual harassment at work?

- 31% of those who had experienced sexual harassment said 'in the last month'
- 8% of those who had experienced sexual harassment said 'in the last school term'

Q19. Who was the perpetrator of the sexual harassment at work?

- 18 people said pupil or learner
- 6 people said a colleague
- 3 people said a manager or supervisor

Q20. Did you report the sexual harassment to your employer or to another body?

- 69% said 'yes'
- 31% said 'no'

Q21. Was this appropriately dealt with?

- 72% said 'yes'
- 28% said 'no'

Q22. Have you ever witnessed a colleague being sexually harassed at work?

- 15% said 'yes'
- 3% said 'don't know'

Q23. If you were sexually harassed at work in the future, would you feel confident reporting it to your employer?

- 14% said 'no'
- 19% said 'don't know'



University of
Roehampton
London

A black and white photograph showing rows of empty desks and chairs in a classroom setting, viewed from the back of the room.

Violence towards teaching/classroom

assistants in mainstream UK schools

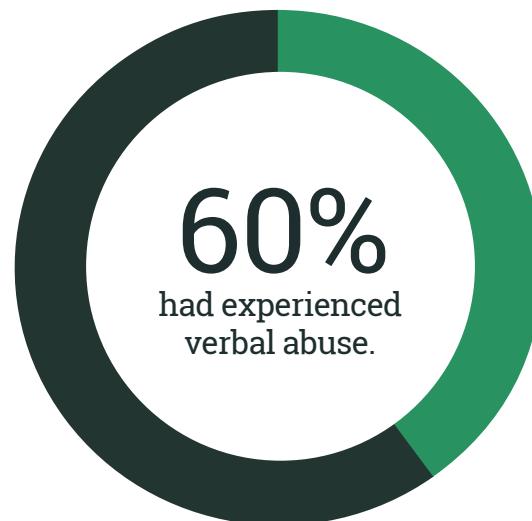
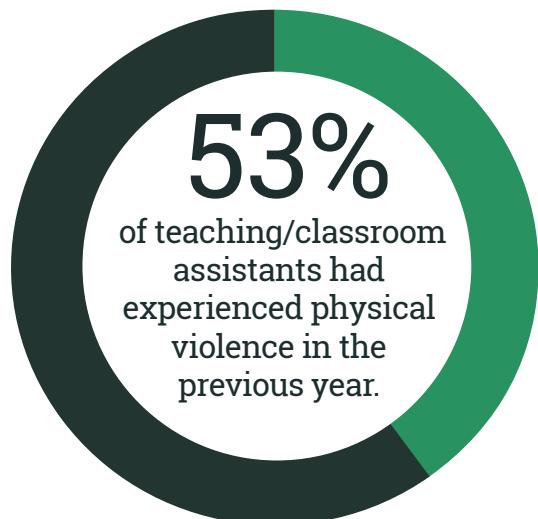
Research findings and recommendations

A. The Research Project

This is the first academic research project in the UK to explore how teaching and classroom assistants have experienced aggressive, violent, and/or abusive behaviour from students while working in mainstream schools.

While there is an important and well-developed body of research on school violence, particularly pupil-on-pupil violence and aggression towards teachers and senior management, there is little knowledge about violence towards school support staff and, in particular, towards teaching/classroom assistants. This is despite research suggesting that it is a much more significant problem for teaching and classroom assistants than for other school staff. For example, a survey by NASUWT (2021)¹ found that six percent of teachers had experienced physical violence from students in the past year, 10 percent had experienced threats of physical violence, and 38 percent had experienced verbal abuse. In contrast, a survey by Unison (2016)² of 14,500 support staff across England, Wales and Northern Ireland found 20 percent had experienced physical violence from students in the past year, 20 percent had experienced verbal threats, and 27 percent had experienced other verbal abuse. In terms of specific roles, the same survey found that 53 percent of teaching/classroom assistants had experienced physical violence in the previous year, 53 percent had experienced verbal threats, and 60 percent had experienced other forms of verbal abuse.

Such surveys are important in highlighting the extent of the problem. However, to understand the nature of the aggression, its context, and how it is experienced and responded to, we need to listen to the words of those who have experienced it. This kind of research can help us to develop meaningful recommendations for how mainstream schools can respond more effectively in supporting their staff as well as their students. This study aimed to address this knowledge gap.



1. See FE News (2021) | 2. See Unison (2016).

Methods

The project centred on 16 in-depth interviews with teaching and classroom assistants from mainstream schools across England, Scotland and Wales. Participants were recruited through social media (e.g. Twitter) and via Unison, who distributed the request for research participants through its networks. The criteria for participation was to have experienced physical violence or aggression from students on two or more occasions while working at a mainstream school. The interviews took place remotely (via video conference or telephone) and the open-ended questions concerned the nature of the aggression/violence, its impacts, its perceived causes, and how the school responded to it. With consent, the interviews were recorded and transcribed and the data was then subject to thematic analysis to identify common themes. The project was approved under the procedures of the University of Roehampton's Research Integrity and Ethics Committee. All names in this report are pseudonyms.

Participants

Of the 16 participants interviewed, twelve were women and four were men, and their age ranged from 28 to 62 (average age=43years). Twelve participants worked in primary schools and four worked in secondary schools, and they had worked in schools from between two and 28 years. Twelve participants were on permanent contracts and four were on fixed-term contracts. Eight of the schools they worked in were academies and eight were managed by the local authority (LA).

“

I was getting bruised on a regular basis, so I was having my face hit, punched ... kicked, spat at, bitten ... shouted at in my face.”

(Joanna)

B. Key findings

In this section, we outline the findings of the research in terms of the teaching/classroom assistants' experiences of i) the nature and the context of the violence from students, ii) the impacts of the violence, iii) the school responses to the violence, and iv) experiences of using restraint techniques during violent encounters.

i) What were the teaching/classroom assistants' experiences of violence from students?

I was getting bruised on a regular basis, so I was having my face hit, punched ... kicked, spat at, bitten ... shouted at in my face. (Joanna)

The aggression experienced by the participants was regular in its frequency and wide-ranging in its nature. It included **verbal abuse** (including being shouted out, called derogatory names), **threats** (including, in several cases, threats to kill), and **physical violence** (including being spat at, kicked, punched, slapped and having objects thrown at them).

Many participants described experiencing aggression from a number of students over the course of their careers. In cases where participants worked one-to-one with students, they sometimes described intense daily aggression from the same student, which escalated over time:

He is quite aggressive, and most of it was directed towards me because I was the closest adult to him, so although I was worried about the other children, that would have been secondary really. All of his anger was directed towards myself. And he's very physical. (Maggie)

While sexual aggression was rarely mentioned, one female participant disclosed an incident of 'inappropriate touching'. Furthermore, some of the dynamics reflected how we understand gender-based violence to operate, with female participants describing having to face violence from teenage boys who were 'bigger and taller' than them which was 'intimidating'.

Participants said that while sometimes there were triggers that preceded the violence, at other times there were not. This made it very difficult to deal with, particularly as there were expectations from senior managers that the participant should have identified the trigger and should have prevented the violence before it started:

[following a violent incident] The actual Deputy said, "Well, what happened to trigger him?" And there's not always triggers with him, sometimes he just does it. And I said there was absolutely nothing, no excuse whatsoever for him to have done what he did. He just all of a sudden went into a rage. But it was almost like, "Well, you must have set him off, you must have..." Do you know what I mean? (Andrea)

In terms of the wider context of violence, a number of explanations were given by participants. Sometimes these perceived causes related to the student themselves, such as aggression as a reaction to distress (sometimes in response to learning environments that did not adequately support children with SEND or other additional needs). Sometimes the causes related to the students' home life and family (such as growing up with domestic abuse and/or in other adverse environments). However, the most common explanations related to institutional factors that facilitated the violence and aggression. Examples included:

- The size of the school and its impact on pupil behaviour (one school was described as 'organised chaos')
- Poor management and leadership (for example, new interim heads coming and going, and the continual upheaval this created caused stress and anxiety for staff which then impacted children)
- Financial constraints, cost-cutting and, in particular, a reduction in teaching/classroom assistants (which increased the risk of harm for those who stayed on)
- Policy change, particularly in relation to processes of academisation where restorative practices such as nurture groups were replaced with strict behaviour policies and the introduction of restraint techniques.

ii) What were the impacts of the violence?

All of the participants disclosed that they had experienced physical injuries as a result of the aggression – examples included bleeding, a black eye, a dislocated thumb, a ripped ligament, and a broken finger. In many cases, the injuries sustained were serious, with some participants requiring ongoing medical treatment such as injections, cauterisation and physiotherapy. Some participants reported continued chronic pain or reduced mobility as a result of their injuries.

Aside from the **physical injuries**, the psychological impacts were profound. All of the participants described experiencing stress, anxiety and/or depression as a result of the ongoing violence, and two participants had been diagnosed with PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) following a specific incident. Some participants had been authorised medical leave by their GP as a result of an incident and one participant had to leave work entirely:

It started to have a really bad impact on my mental health and my physical health because unfortunately I didn't have any support at work. And I had to stop going to work because I couldn't sleep at night time...[...] Obviously I spoke to my managers before reaching this point and they didn't really put anything in place, so I had to stop going to work to look after myself. I came to the conclusion that the best thing for me was just to leave because I didn't want to put myself in that situation anymore (Melissa)

There were other impacts: for example, time taken off work as a result of the physical and psychological injuries resulted in reduced income, often exacerbating an already-precarious financial situation. It also impacted home and family life, as participants felt increasingly pre-occupied and stressed at home which negatively impacted their family relationships, particularly with their own children.

The experiences also started to ebb away at the participants' professional confidence, as they started to doubt whether they could perform their job properly. Indeed, the participants felt that, although it had not been explicitly stated as such, it was their responsibility to control the violence – not only towards themselves, but towards the other

children and towards other staff members. The weight of this responsibility added to feelings of stress and anxiety in the workplace. It also meant that, for some participants who felt they had no support, the safest course of action was to allow themselves to become the school punchbag:

I worry about him hitting the other staff. If he hits me, I tend to just let him hit me because I find that not reacting to him works better than reacting to him. So eventually if he punches and kicks me a few times, well, if he realises he's not getting a reaction he'll stop because I'm not reacting to him. (Carl).

iii) How did teaching/classroom assistants experience the school response?

Participants described a number of strategies they used to try to manage the violence. Examples included keeping a 'behaviour diary' each day to identify techniques that worked (and those that didn't work). Some attended courses (e.g. anger management, nurture groups, complex needs training), although sometimes the cost of the courses prevented them from attending as many as they felt they needed.

Despite the seriousness of the aggression and violence experienced, the participants often felt that the school did not respond appropriately. Participants recognised that criminalising the child would not be helpful, but participants had nevertheless considered contacting the police (and one did) because of the failure of school managers to take the incident seriously.

Violent incidents were not always logged in incident report systems as they should be (e.g. My Concern or CPOMS). Furthermore, although participants described other teaching/classroom assistants as supportive, they experienced less support from teachers and senior managers. For example, Paul described an incident where a student was hitting him in a classroom and '...the teacher carried on with the class...and he carried on hammering away at me...'. Similarly, Carol described being hit across the back by a bottle full of sand in the playground and '...the other staff that were on the playground didn't react at all, which I was a bit surprised at'.

Such passive bystander responses contributed to participants feeling that the violence directed towards them was not considered to be important and that colleagues were unconcerned about their safety. Indeed, one participant felt like his only value was as a 'bouncer':

They don't trust your judgement because you're a teaching assistant, that's how it feels a lot of the time. And not all, some staff are lovely, but you always feel like, Well you want me when the shit hits the fan. ... There's been a few times where a student will kick off and nobody else will deal with it because they're too scared so they call me down and ... sometimes it's kind of ... that's not my job, I have a degree, you know? I'm not ... obviously I will help my colleagues and I will protect students, but sometimes you feel like you're used as a bouncer (Mark)

The implicit message conveyed to the participants was that it was their job to manage student violence and, combined with their low professional status within the school hierarchy, this enabled the normalisation of student violence towards them. For example, Maggie's experience is indicative of many of the stories we were told:

*He came over and punched me in the face. And my colleague was like, "Whoa, that is totally unacceptable", went off to get the SENCO, who came back and took him away and that was it. I just sort of like ... because we'd got other children in the room, I was trying to protect them from him and ... you know, I just went back to work as normal. And then a little while later, the SENCO came back with the boy and said, "You owe Ms. **** an apology" and he just looked at me and went "Sorry". And that was it, I was given the boy back and carried on working for the rest of the day (Maggie)*

Participants noted that the students often faced no sanctions following a violent incident towards them, and yet sanctions would be put in place if a teacher or senior manager had been assaulted. This discrepancy made participants feel unsupported and un-valued, and raised concerns about the message this would send to students about the acceptability of such violence, particularly towards a staff group who were pre-dominantly female, low paid and experienced low professional status³. If any sanctions were applied – for example, through

3. In 2021, 93% of teaching/classroom assistants in England were female (Department for Education, 2022). The average actual pay per annum for teaching assistants is approx. £12,000 (TES, 2019).

a fixed-term exclusion – the participants were rarely involved in this decision-making process, and were often not informed of the outcome.

iv) What are teaching/classroom assistants' experiences of using restraint techniques?

If a teacher said, "Oh I'm not able to control this child", they would send me in there... But, then again, there's that whole borderline of, OK, if I'm holding this child and I'm restricting them, it could lead to bruises, it could lead to ... you know what I mean? And then, because it's just me and that child, then everything was going towards me, so I'd try and hold them and they'd be scratching or trying to kick and bite and spit and trying to do everything they can to get away, and we don't really know why they reacted in that way. You try and do the best you can, and basically you just don't want to do it anymore. It just gets you and it makes you think, why am I even here? No one wants to do this, you know? (Brian)

Participants spoke at length about the use of restraint techniques as a method of dealing with student violence and aggression, and had very mixed feelings about it. Not all of the participants were trained in restraint: a minority had said that they had requested restraint training to help them manage the violence, but this had been refused due to costs. Others did not want to be trained, but were given no choice. For example, Judy, who was in her 60s, explained that she '...tried to refuse because of my age, and I've got a bit of arthritis, so I didn't really feel it was appropriate for me to be restraining children on the floor'. Yet her headteacher insisted that she train and be given the role as 'first responder' in cases of student violence.

Those participants who were trained in restraint techniques (or 'positive handling strategies'), described the process as physically and emotionally tiring for both them and the student. They were concerned that they might inadvertently hurt the student, and/or face accusations or an investigation as a consequence. Some voiced concerns that they were less protected against disciplinary action than teachers would be in the same situation.

Some participants commented that the guidance for using restraint techniques was very ambiguous, and this exacerbated their concerns:

Our headteacher said we can't afford to put anybody else on the training, so just follow the Government guidelines, which are if you're in danger, somebody else in danger or the student is in danger, you are allowed to restrain them. But in the same sentence it said, but we do not want you putting your hands on the kids (Mark).

Participants explained that the use of restraint was not always brief: one participant said that it could last 'for up to an hour and a half' and the threat may not necessarily be reduced once the restraint is removed. Participants also noted that appropriate follow-up, which should include a debriefing and discussion with senior management, was not always implemented. Furthermore, restraint was not easy to implement in cases of sudden violence:

The training's fine, but when you're not looking and you turn and get a punch in the face, you haven't got time to react (Jane)

Ultimately the participants recognised that restraint achieves nothing in the long-term, and that much more fundamental change is required in schools to both prevent student violence and aggression and to protect and support school support staff from victimisation.

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The training's fine, but when you're not looking and you turn and get a punch in the face, you haven't got time to react.”

(Jane)

C. Recommendations for schools

In this research project, the participants described some very disturbing incidents which suggest that both they and other students were at risk of harm. All of the teaching and classroom assistants interviewed experienced a combination of physical violence, verbal abuse, and psychological aggression from students in their school, often on a daily basis. The impact of this was far-reaching – it impacted their physical and emotional health, their family relationships, their income and their professional confidence. Despite the seriousness of what they faced, they did not feel appropriately supported by their school. The participants felt under-valued and that their primary role was to deal with the aggression that other staff members were not able to, or did not want to, deal with. The situations described, including school responses, also sounded distressing and potentially trauma-inducing for the student displaying the aggression.

This research specifically focused on the experiences of teaching and classroom assistants who face such violence. Clearly, a lot more work needs to be done with students to prevent such violence, including a serious consideration of whether the support needs of children with SEND and those facing adverse childhood experiences are being adequately met in school environments. However, based on these research findings, we make some key recommendations for how schools could better support their teaching/classroom assistants. First, we make recommendations for good practice following a violent incident, and second, we make recommendations for wider institutional change.

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Recommendations for good practice following a violent incident

- 1) Every incident of student violence or aggression towards school staff should be reported and logged, with time given to staff within their working hours to do this. Staff members should always be given a copy of the report form.
- 2) The student should be immediately separated from the staff member, who should be given a safe space (or sent home) to recover. Staff members should not be expected to continue working with the student until an appropriate resolution process has been completed satisfactorily.
- 3) Staff members should be encouraged to seek a medical check-up following a violent incident.
- 4) Statements should be taken from the staff member, the student, and any witnesses and an investigation should be undertaken (by an independent party), with the outcome decision reported in a timely manner.
- 5) Care should be taken to avoid making blaming or accusatory comments towards the victimised staff member, particularly prior to the conclusion of any investigation.
- 6) Restorative practice should be implemented where appropriate to enable both the staff member and the student to experience closure. A meeting based on restorative principles will enable both sides to communicate their feelings about the incident, facilitate mutual understanding and allow for learning to take place.
- 7) Psychological/counselling support should be made available to any staff member who experiences a violent incident.
- 8) Staff members should be encouraged to take leave on full pay if they are experiencing physical or psychological injuries as a result of a violent incident.

Wider institutional changes

- 9) Schools should invest in and value the important role that teaching/classroom assistants do, and reflect this in their pay and in providing ongoing CPD and training opportunities (particularly when requested).
 - 10) Schools should establish a specific support fund for training/course attendance for support staff to help keep themselves safe.
 - 11) Support staff should be enfranchised in processes for both preventing violence (e.g. contributing to risk assessments) and following an incident (e.g. contributing to the decision-making process of how the school should best respond).
 - 12) There needs to be a culture change that addresses current 'us and them' divisions between teaching staff and support staff, which is damaging to an inclusive school ethos.
 - 13) Schools should provide regular whole-school training on how to respond to student aggression and violence towards all staff members (regardless of staff role/status)
 - 14) Schools should develop a clear and unambiguous whole-school policy on student violence that is produced in collaboration with all stakeholders: Headteachers, HR, teachers, support staff, governors and unions. This should be reviewed regularly.
 - 15) It is questionable whether restraint techniques are appropriate or effective in many of the situations we heard about as part of this research. However, if restraint techniques are to be used in a school, then the whole school should be trained in using them, with opt-outs available for staff members on health or other grounds (e.g. risk of re-traumatisation)
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