

Student Violence in Schools – An Emerging Challenge for Educators

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Abstract

Teacher well-being continues to gather increased attention in the contemporary educational scenario. School-based violence is a significant contributor to the detrimental experiences of educators, including various forms of violence perpetrated by students. Even though research in this area has received global attention over the past decade, the paucity of ample evidence-base for strategies for the well-being of teachers demands urgent research in this area. The current research evidence suggests that student violence adversely affects a wide range of areas, including mental and physical health, classroom management, job retention, self-efficacy, and overall personal and professional life. This research focuses on how student behaviours and school violence impact the well-being of teachers. Embracing a qualitative approach, the research aims to draw upon educators' lived experiences in the Northern Territory (NT) schools of Australia. This paper reviews data from a short online survey that includes the foundational demography of educators in the NT and some of the key emergent themes that inform a larger study. Statistics from the online survey indicate a considerable degree of victimisation experienced by these educators in the NT. The significance of the study is further highlighted as it covers a geographical location where there is a predominance of Australian First Nations people. This population still suffers from the distress and trauma of colonisation. Here we gain an initial snapshot of the prolific distress from student violence suffered by many teachers in the NT, alongside a backdrop of trauma experienced by children of colonised peoples.

Keywords: Student Behaviour, Teacher Well-Being, Student Violence, Teacher Victimisation

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Introduction

Teachers serve as role models, and their mental health has a big impact on how well their students grow and develop. While bullying and victimisation among students have received a lot of attention, student violence against teachers (SVAT) is still a topic that needs more research (Espelage et al., 2013). SVAT has become a prevalent issue in the 21st-century global education scenario requiring a rapid response (Espelage et al., 2013; McMahon et al., 2014). Numerous publications demonstrate this global prevalence and have demonstrated its harmful effects on mental health, work environments, job performance, efficacy and staff turnover (Berlanda, Fraizzoli, de Cordova, & Pedrazza, 2019; Burns, Fogelgarn, & Billett, 2020; Chen & Astor, 2009; Curran, Viano, & Fisher, 2019; De Wet, 2010; Galand, Lecocq, & Philippot, 2007; Gerberich et al., 2014; E. Lowe, Picknoll, Chivers, Farrington, & Rycroft, 2020; McMahon et al., 2014; B. Moon & McCluskey, 2020; Reddy et al., 2013; Wilson, Douglas, & Lyon, 2010). Internationally, schools have prioritised student victimisations despite reports of increased teacher victimisation incidents and the failure of zero-tolerance measures to combat SVAT (McMahon et al., 2014). Therefore, it is necessary to pay serious attention to preventing this widespread issue.

Significance of research

It is impossible to disregard the importance of teachers in nation-building. In the current field of education, teachers are subject to unreal demands, particularly from parents, and increased responsibilities for students' welfare and external impacts on learning (Berlanda et al., 2019). There is not much research undertaken in the Australian context compared to studies in other areas of the world, notably in Western countries, hence further studies are warranted (E. Lowe et al., 2020, Burns et al., 2020). Having said that, SVAT is not just a concern in the West; it has spread to Asia and Africa as well (Chen & Astor, 2009; De Wet, 2010; Moon & McCluskey, 2016). This study was intended to generate an experiential knowledge base by delving deeper into the real-life experiences (lifeworld) of teachers who witnessed or experienced the phenomenon of student violence. This knowledge can help to improve further the current departmental policies and strategies for the wellbeing of the teachers. It is critical for educators to understand how teacher victimisation has impacted their efficacy and which strategies can produce a successful teaching-learning experience. It is expected that the study will assist in launching several further enquiries into SVAT and/or other pertinent topics in the Northern Territory context.

Types of SVAT, impact on educators and triggers

Diverse forms of teacher victimisation have been found throughout international SVAT research. In McMahon et al.'s (2014) study, SVAT was divided into three distinct groups, including harassment, property offences, and physical offences. In their study, the most frequent type of SVAT was identified to be harassment (including obscene remarks & gestures, verbal threats and intimidation), which accounted for 73% of respondents. Property offences, such as theft and damage to private property, accounted for 54%. In an Australian study in Western Australia also, more teachers reported experience of harassment from students (64.3%) with female teachers reporting more incidents of harassment (77.1%) compared to male teachers (42.9%) (E. Lowe et al., 2020). Another Australian study which included 560 respondents also revealed similar results showing that 80% of teachers experienced bullying and harassment from students and parents over 9-12 months prior to the survey (Fogelgarn, Burns, & Billett, 2019).

Although SVAT research is still emerging globally, there is evidence showing teachers' personal and professional lives are negatively impacted by episodes of teacher victimisation. According to research reports, affected teachers are more inclined to experience emotional and physical suffering, strained personal relations, difficulty remaining in the profession, and increased levels of anxiety all of which have a negative effect on their work performance and consequently, students' academic progress (Martinez et al., 2016; Moon & McCluskey, 2016). On an individual level, SVAT incidents are likely to have a detrimental impact on educators' sense of safety, emotional health, their capacity to do their job well, and they may even make them less motivated with their jobs (Montgomery, 2019). Montgomery, (2019) also highlights that from students' points of view, SVAT is vindicated as a result of the complex teacher-student relationship (sometimes explained as power imbalances due to educators' instructional and reprimanding authority). For example, "unreasonable requirements, teachers' unfair treatment, disagreements with the teachers, being punished by teachers or being provoked by teachers" (Montgomery, 2019, p. 126). The impact of SVAT is also seen at the organisational level in terms of the turnover rate of teachers, absenteeism, low motivation, and overall job outputs (Montgomery, 2019). McMahon et al. (2017) have explained these three levels of interactional dynamism within the socio-ecological model of analysis. It was also highlighted in McMahon et al.'s (2017) study on how educators can be burdened by inadequate administrative and leadership support, a flawed system, or weak organisational support.

Physical aggression can include minor behaviours of "pushing, shoving and throwing objects" or severe forms of actions such as "fighting, beating and use of weapons (McMahon et al., 2020, p. 116). McMahon et al. (2020) used the functional model of ABC (antecedent, behaviour, and consequences) to identify the contexts of aggression. They argue that this can help to understand the antecedents and consequences of particular student behaviour and pinpoint the causes and effects of violence so effective behaviour management strategies can be developed. The most common antecedent identified in the study was disciplining the students (25%). Another triggering event for SVAT was determined to be separating student fights (16%).

Current literature

a. Global scenario

Studies in this area, notably in America and the Western world, were stimulated by the formation of the American Psychological Association Task Force on Classroom Violence Directed Against Teachers, in 2008 (Espelage et al., 2013; McMahon et al., 2014). Unfavourable school environments, inadequate collegial and administrative support, and overpopulated residential areas are associated with a high incidence of violence in schools (Anderman et al., 2018). SVAT is not limited to physical or verbal abuse, as there are several covert forms of abuse which can include opposing, belittling, ignoring, insulting or constant disruptive behaviours in the class (Billett et al., 2020, Burns et al., 2020, Chen & Astor, 2009). Unfortunately, these covert forms of SVAT are largely unreported but still harm educators (Anderman, et al., 2018). Hence, plans for comprehensive school safety should consider teacher victimisation as a key element according to Espelage et al. (2013).

b. Australian Scenario

Even though it is acknowledged that there has not been much research on SVAT in Australia, there are alarming indicators in the available evidence from the research that has already been conducted. Indicators of workplace bullying on a broader scale were found in Australian schools, according to a quantitative study by D. Riley, Duncan, and Edwards (2011) that covered teaching and non-teaching personnel as respondents. However, the Australia-wide longitudinal study commenced in 2011 to monitor the school principals’ and deputy/assistant principals’ health and wellbeing demonstrated a consistent increase in indicators of physical violence, threats of violence and bullying against educators perpetrated by students. Although NT’s participation in the survey was around 3 per cent only, I consider this study as a springboard for my research as it indicated such a high prevalence of student violence in Australian schools (P. Riley, 2013; P. Riley, 2014; P. Riley, 2015; P. Riley, 2017; P. Riley, 2018; P. Riley, 2019; P. Riley & See, 2020). As illustrated in the tables below, the Northern Territory recorded high prevalence (highlighted), particularly for indicators of ‘threats of violence’ and ‘physical violence.’

Threats of Violence								
State	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
NT	48.8	54.3	48.3	48.6	50	55.1	57.9	54
NSW	28.9	34.5	31.1	36.1	44.9	44.3	41.8	42
VIC	37.6	36.8	36.1	33.7	39.8	42.3	49.7	41
QLD	37.4	33.8	36.3	30.9	34.6	38.3	49.7	49
SA	46.3	46.1	45.4	40	36.7	43.6	43.4	45
WA	41.4	38.7	41.8	40.8	43.1	47.6	44.4	45
TAS	31.1	40	42	51.7	62.1	47	42	49
ACT	34.1	32	25	30.4	42.1	51.8	55.1	65

Source: Riley, 2019 pg. 86

Table 1. Principal and deputy/assistant principals’ health, safety and wellbeing Survey data 2018
State-wise percentage of school leaders experiencing threats of violence.

Physical Violence								
State	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
NT	41.9	45.7	37.9	51.4	50	53.3	47.7	50
NSW	21.9	25.1	22.6	27.1	35.5	32.8	35.4	33
VIC	25	25.1	26.6	24	28.1	29.3	34.3	34
QLD	27.9	25.9	28.1	22.8	26.2	29.8	36.2	36
SA	32.7	32.6	34.2	31.3	24.2	36.1	37.4	39
WA	32.1	35.1	32.7	31.8	36.7	38.2	41.3	43
TAS	26.7	34	42	41.4	43.1	39.4	34.4	46
ACT	29.3	32.1	32.1	27.5	38.6	48.2	40.8	51

Source: Riley, 2019 pg. 86

Table 2. Principal and deputy/assistant principals’ health, safety and wellbeing Survey data 2018
State-wise percentage of school leaders experiencing physical violence.

Although Tronc (2010, p. 36) classified the violence in Australian schools as the level one category involving “minor assaults and bullying”, the factors causing educator burnout was

the relatively high rate of repeated occurrences of these incidents (Sullivan, Johnson, Owens, & Conway, 2014). According to Fogelgarn et al. (2019) in an Australia-wide study with 560 participants, eighty-five per cent of teachers thought student and parent initiated bullying and harassment was a problem in schools. A similar finding of 70% of teachers suffering SVAT over a two-year period was found in a quantitative study conducted in Western Australia with 56 educators, with harassment being the most common type of violence (E. Lowe et. al., 2020). In a national survey conducted by Monash University, Australia, which included 2444 teachers (including 41 from the Northern Territory), 19% of respondents reported feeling unsafe in their schools (Heffernan, Longmuir, & Bright, 2019).

Misconceptions

There are several misconceptions in the teaching profession which undermine the value of pedagogy. The belief that the students' behaviours are the result of teachers' ineffective instructional approaches is a misconception (Billett et al., 2020). Many times, the fact that the issue of student aggressiveness towards teachers has multiple causes is not acknowledged. When bullying is examined, the concept of power imbalance is also taken into account, but when violence against teachers is involved, its presence is unclear (Dzuka & Dalbert, 2007; Riley et al., 2011). Billett, Fogelgarn, and Burns (2020) clarify that the belief that students cannot bully teachers as teachers are more powerful, is a misconception. Billett et al. (2020) also negate the perception that teaching is an easy job. Teachers are supposedly arriving late and leaving early, and they receive 12 weeks of paid leave annually, all of which contribute to the false public perception that teachers have an easy job (Billett et al, 2020). Interestingly, Swetnam (1992) uses a few instances to demonstrate how popular culture through certain fictional television shows and other forms of entertainment media tends to portray teaching as a simple job.

Research in NT and the impact of colonisation

The research was conducted in the Northern Territory (NT) state of Australia. First Nations people make up a higher proportion of its population (26.3%) compared to 4.6 per cent or less in any other Australian states (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2022). European colonisation had a devastating impact on the life of First Nations people. The health inequalities among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people remain the highest of any population group in Australia, and their life expectancy is shorter than that of non-Indigenous people (Griffiths, Coleman, Lee, & Madden, 2016). It is evident from the literature that First Nations People continue to experience several forms of disadvantage including social discrimination, poor health, substance abuse, isolation, higher unemployment rate, poverty, violence and overrepresentation in the criminal justice system (ABS, 2017).

The paper emphasises the need of acknowledging the aforementioned aspects when doing research on SVAT in the NT. K. Lowe (2017) highlights the cultural divide that exists between the teaching community and the First Nations population as a contributing cause to their educational disadvantages especially in schools with 100% First Nations students. He argues that it is essential for teachers to acquire adequate cultural knowledge of and responsiveness to the impact on First Nations people's lives, and the strategies for accomplishing effective classroom experiences in schools with children of indigenous backgrounds. Stressing the significance of Indigenous Standpoint Theory, Lowe illustrates three interrelated factors which are crucial in recognising community level factors in First Nation people's educational participation. These included the "formation of localised

Aboriginal community standpoint positioning” and its influence on the relationship between First Nations people and schools, “development of community and school engagement” as well as its influence on educators and First Nations people and formation of “acquired professional knowledge of teachers” with its influence on community engagement (K. Lowe, 2017, p. 38). These factors are theorised as potentially having a confounding relationship with the experiences of SVAT in the NT.

Defining SVAT

Due to conceptual difficulties and a dearth of sufficient studies in this field, it may be challenging to come up with a clear definition for SVAT that is comprehensive. Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2020) emphasises the significance of using a definition on a national scale for the measurement of SVAT and tracking progress in combating this problem. However, they also acknowledge the challenge to obtain this uniform national picture without adequate research-based evidence. The definition promoted by De Wet (2010) was used for the current research since they totally address the characteristics of SVAT that the research sought to cover. Hence for the purpose of this research, SVAT is defined as a deliberate and repeated act or behaviour which affects the physical, social, and emotional wellbeing of teachers and causes disruption in the school environment. This includes acts of bullying through verbal, non-verbal, physical, sexual, racial and/or electronic means or social media.

Research Approach

The project consisted of two phases. This paper is presented based on the first phase of the research as the second phase is not yet complete. In phase I, following approval from Charles Darwin University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), an online short survey that was available to all teachers in NT was undertaken. Previous studies showed that due to teachers' concern about reporting teacher victimisation, anonymous online surveys could produce greater results (McMahon et al., 2014). This survey helped identify a participant pool for choosing interview respondents from those survey respondents who volunteered for an interview. The short survey was made available through a variety of sources including Facebook, email contact of education unions and the teachers' festival held in August 2021. The survey remained open on social media for about 80 days. In phase II, the lived experiences of 13 teachers who experienced SVAT were gathered using a semi-structured interview following guidelines from Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). Examples of open-ended questions used were:

- ‘What has been your experience with student violence?’
- ‘What do you think are the reasons for the student violence directed against the teachers?’,
- ‘What is the influence of student violence on your professional and/or private life?’
- ‘What helped you deal with student violence experience?’ and
- ‘What would be for you a positive development for tackling student violence in schools?’

The analysis is being conducted through the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The following research questions have guided analysis in each phase.

Phase I

- 1) Which teachers in primary and secondary schools in NT have experienced student violence? What has been the nature of the SVAT?

Phase II

- 2) What are the effects of student violence against primary and secondary school teachers in the Northern Territory?
- 3) What are the factors that enable teachers who have experienced student violence in primary and secondary schools in the NT, to remain in the profession?

This paper focuses on the Phase I question and partially responds to question 2 in Phase II based on currently available literature and two of the interview participants' reflective accounts.

Phase I response

The short survey received responses from 122 teachers in total. This is just over 2% of the total number of teachers in NT. As the aim of the short survey was to identify respondents for the interview, the survey was closed when the required number of volunteers for the interview was obtained. There were 73 primary school teachers, 26 middle school teachers, 18 high school teachers, and 5 special education teachers among them. There were 100 teachers working in urban schools, 4 in regional schools, and 17 in very remote schools. Thirteen teachers were interviewed after 28 teachers expressed their interest. The quantified demographic data revealed by the short survey was as follows.

Stage of teaching	Choice count	Locality of teaching	Choice Count
Primary school teachers	73	Urban schools	100
Middle school teachers	26	Regional schools	4
High school teachers	18	Remote schools	18
Special School teachers	5	-	
Total	122	Total	122

Table 3. Participation in the survey

Out of the total of 122 teachers responded, 119 teachers (97.54%) expressed they had encountered SVAT in their schools. This represents more than 2 % of all teachers that are currently registered in the NT. SVAT occurred within the preceding year for 76% of teachers and between 1-2 years for 17% of teachers. The most prominent forms of SVAT were disruptive behaviours and physical assaults.

Years of teaching	Choice count	Type of SVAT	Choice count
0-5 years	39	Physical	93
5-10 years	25	Social	54
10-15 years	18	Emotional	73
15-20 years	16	Disruptive behaviour	101
20 + years	24	Bullying	44
Total	122	Total	365

Table 4. Teaching experience and type of SVAT

Descriptive summary

A brief descriptive narrative of two participants is provided to put the findings of the phase I short survey into perspective. Although the purpose of the short survey was not to ascertain the prevalence of SVAT in the NT, the response rate (just over 2% of the total teacher population in the territory) suggested a tendency towards teacher victimisation in the territory that was consistent with the principals' and deputy/assistant principals' survey discussed above.

Participant 1:

Emma had over 20 years of teaching experience in urban schools in NT. Emma believed that because she was an experienced teacher, she would no longer be a target of SVAT, but this has continued. She was injured when breaking up student fights, she was scratched, spat across her face, and punched. A male student punched Emma and then told the principal she had punched him. She described how uncomfortable she felt being questioned after students made false allegations. She was left to prove her innocence as no one was there to defend her.

This participant's insights included that SVAT incidents are devastating. It is a prerequisite that teachers have ample time following an incident to recover and reflect. It's also critical to provide opportunities for adequate counselling. Instead of simply offering support for the sake of it, the support must be secure and efficient.

Participant 2:

Maddison was one of those teachers who experienced horrendous SVAT issues. She had over 16 years of teaching experience in a remote school. She experienced ongoing verbal and sexual harassment at school. Students from her school repeatedly broke into her remote residence when she was at school. On one occasion, one student ejaculated everywhere in her room and wrote sexual comments on the walls. She told the principal and told the Union, but there was no adequate support, and she was left in that house all weekend with her backdoor hinges ripped off. This was the kind of violence she was experiencing there, and she was not feeling safe at all. She left that school after she was diagnosed with PTSD.

This participant's insight included that she agreed that new teachers starting out in remote teaching need proper orientation. The importance of teaching from a trauma-informed perspective was emphasised.

Discussion and conclusion

The issue of teacher violence in schools is progressively gaining significant attention. The current study represents the first effort to exclusively examine teacher victimisation by students in the Northern Territory. The short survey used in the first phase of the study seemed to elicit a lot of reaction from the target audience. This survey was designed to find teachers in the Northern Territory schools who have dealt with SVAT and to answer my initial questions, "Which teachers in primary and secondary schools in NT have experienced student violence." and "the nature of SVAT they experience". The results of the short survey served to reaffirm the high rates of SVAT indicators reported by the NT schools in the principals' and deputy principals' longitudinal study. Teachers from across the state reported experiencing various forms of abuse including physical, social, emotional, disruptive behaviour and bullying. As the purpose of this short survey was to develop a participant pool

only, questions about the specific breakdown of the types of violence experienced and other detailed demographics were omitted.

Final conclusions based on the IPA analysis are still in the preliminary stages, however, the topics emerging during the initial analysis and connections with recent research data are in the context of two conditions. Firstly, it should be noted, based on recent literature, that teachers have a history of being targeted by other parties as well, including parents, co-workers, and administrative leadership (McMahon et al., 2014). Though the study's primary emphasis was on SVAT occurrences, several participants mentioned instances of bullying and harassment from parents during the experience-sharing interviews. Secondly, McMahon et al. (2014) highlight that schools that are in more violent neighbourhoods and/or have negative/violent school environments that do not adequately address behaviours may have higher rates of student or parent related violence. In congruence with this view, interview participants expressed opinions about how community and socio-cultural elements might affect student attitudes and how important they are in dealing with SVAT, even though socio-economic circumstances were not specifically focused on in interviews.

The findings of this research will serve as a crucial basis for further research and offer suggestions for school-based interventions, including protective and remedial measures for teachers. Gender disparities did not have a significant impact on this research because the study was qualitative and only focused on experience gathering with a small sample. Many educators shared the opinion that they feel obligated to step in to break up student disputes to protect the students. Unfortunately, it appears that teachers are often singled out for abuse in this context. Interestingly research evidence indicates that educators put themselves in hazardous situations at work, such as becoming involved in fights that could increase teacher victimisation rates (McMahon et al., 2014). When significant SVAT occurrences did not result in firm leadership action and students received no consequences for it, many participants typically felt frustrated and unsatisfied. This view was clearly supported by McMahon et al.'s (2020) ABC study which emphasises the importance of leadership's role in the effective management of SVAT and adequate support to teachers.

Teachers whose teaching career was at very remote schools in the Northern Territory recounted their disappointing experiences with inadequate cultural orientation to working in this context. K. Lowe (2017) corroborates this view that educators are hired into schools with inadequate social, political, or specialist knowledge of the distinctive needs and aspirations of the First Nations students, families and communities. This lack of knowledge may make it more difficult for them to establish effective relationships with First Nations pupils which may potentially minimise the opportunities or situations for SVAT. Correspondingly, it is encouraging to note that the benefits of embracing and integrating cultural aspects into education are equally shared by First Nations students, communities, and schools (Milgate, 2017). The discussion throughout this paper highlights the increasing prevalence of SVAT in Australia and across countries that have a negative effect on the professional and personal life of educators. In summary, any recommended strategies to combat the effects of SVAT particularly in the Northern Territory must be managed within a broader cultural context with specialised services catered to educators' needs and aspirations.

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