

VIOLENCE AGAINST TEACHERS IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT: AN EXPLORATIVE STUDY

Isabella Corradini, & Assunta Marano
Themis Research Centre (Italy)

Abstract

Violence in school against teachers is a current problem characterized by complex dynamics (Espelage et al., 2013; Mc Mahon et al., 2014), and can take many forms, from verbal assaults to psychological and physical attacks.

Our study has explored the teachers' perception and their experiences with respect to this phenomenon. The tool used for the study is composed by a questionnaire (QUIVAT, *Questionnaire investigating Violence Against Teacher*, Corradini and Marano, 2018) supplemented by focus group discussions to better analyze teachers' safety in the school environment, the characteristics of their specific workplace, their proposals about prevention measures.

Four primary and four upper secondary schools in a major European city (included 54 teachers: 24 of them from primary and 30 from secondary schools) were involved in the study.

We conducted data collection and integrated analysis (ATLAS.ti; IBM SPSS) by reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes in seven categories. The outcomes of this exploratory study show that 63.4% of teachers, at all school levels, has experienced some forms of school-related violence, and the verbal type is the one they are most exposed to. Regression analysis indicates that the causes of the problem are mainly attributed to situational and social/environmental factors. We discuss these results considering also the self-reported health implications by those teachers exposed to the violence and the importance of prevention measures.

Keywords: *Violence, school, stress, victimization, prevention.*

1. Introduction

School violence is a current and relevant topic, even if in the last years research has strongly focused on bullying at school among students. Violence against teachers is characterized by varied dynamics involving all school personnel (Espelage et al., 2013; Mc Mahon et al., 2014) and including bullying, intimidation, verbal assault, property damage, etc. (Espelage and Horne, 2008). Hence, violence against teachers can take many forms of aggression, from relational to physical ones (Crick, 1996). One of the most relevant theory used to analyse violence in schools is the social-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1979; 1994), that looks at behavior within the system of the interactions between a child, immediate environment (family, school, and peers) and larger social environment (community, society, culture), as well as interactions among different levels of the environment.

According to the literature concerning the impacts of violence on teachers who are victims of school violence (e.g. Daniels, Bradley, & Hays, 2007; Dzuka and Dalbert, 2007) the consequences include individual and psychological aspects, such as depression, anxiety and somatic symptoms; teachers' performance and their life satisfaction can also be affected.

Given that school violence is a public health problem (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016), studies are also focusing on risks factors for assaults against teachers (Gerberich et al., 2014). Moreover, considering the complexity of the issue, prevention should be based on a broad framework (Espelage et al., 2013) referring to the social-ecological theory, able to include activities assessment and teachers' training.

2. Design and methods

This pilot study aims to analyze teachers' perception and their experiences on the phenomenon of the violence against them in the school environment. The study has been conducted on 54 teachers (24 from primary and 30 from upper secondary schools in Rome, Italy).

Each participant completed the QUIVAT, *Questionnaire investigating Violence Against Teacher* (Corradini and Marano, 2018), a self-report measures of the scholastic relationship, composed by 24 multiple-choice questions. We developed this instrument on the basis of the social-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), as a theoretical and empirical derived questionnaire from a previous work conducted with teachers to select the most significant items.

After the questionnaire administration, part of the sample participated in focus group discussions to better analyze teachers' safety in the school environment, the characteristics of their specific workplace, and their proposals about prevention measures.

For the analysis the sample was stratified with respect to the following variables: age (Percentage/Range 25-34: 20%; 35-44: 32%; 45-54: 36%; 55-64: 12%); teaching seniority (Percentage/Range 1-10: 23%; 11-21: 35%; 21-30: 23%; more than 30: 21%) and gender (M=68%; F=32%). Moreover, the sample was balanced in terms of employment status and level of education.

3. Analysis and results

Analysis were conducted using quantitative statistical method to identify violence factors against teachers and their possible correlations and consequences.

Descriptive analysis (frequencies, means, and standard deviation) was conducted for demographic and teacher's career variables. Comparisons between continuous distributions were carried out by means of the analysis of variance (ANOVA). The Pearson correlation coefficient and stepwise regression analysis was also used. All these statistical analyses were performed using the SPSS software package (IBM SPSS statistical software version 23), Chicago, Illinois, USA. We conducted data collection and integrated analysis (ATLAS.ti 7 Scientific Software) reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes in seven categories as following:

1. Awareness of the type of violence;
2. Reporting violence facts to the authority;
3. Main causes determining violence;
4. Protective and risk factors for teachers;
5. Consequences;
6. Measures to prevent and contrast the phenomenon;
7. School policies.

We now describe the main outcomes of our study.

Code 1. Awareness of the type of violence

Referring to the QUIVAT questions, teachers' responses are polarized only on two typologies: physical and verbal assaults. In our questionnaire the term "physical assault" refers to both intentional actions with physical contact and actions not directed toward teachers, such as the launch of objects in the classroom that however physically hits them. With the term "verbal assault" we refer to a hostile communication, e.g. insulting, shouting, intimidating. In our study, 63.4% of teachers has experienced some form of school-related violence: more than one third declares that the verbal assault is the one they are most exposed to, while 2% has suffered from physical assaults. Moreover, 18% complains a disrespectful communication, not in person but on the Internet, at the limit of *defamation*: they are mocked and offended by students or their parents in several online chats.

Code 2. Reporting violence facts to the authority

Different answers are codified in this category. 39% of teachers declares they activated student disciplinary proceedings; 2% advised police and judicial systems; 48% contacted students' parents. Among intervention strategies, especially when the perpetrator is a student, teachers can decide to involve student's parents also to prevent future violence (Anderman et al., 2018).

Code 3. Main causes determining violence

The respondents report multiple causes of violence in schools. In particular, a 42% of them stresses the role of school *situational factors* (e.g. the level of school organization, lack of clarity in parent engagement, lack of managerial support), and a 56% *social/environmental factors* (e.g. economic system, political system, mass media). Teachers are aware that an integration of these factors is needed to explain the phenomenon of violence.

Code 4. Protective and risk factors for teachers

Given that risk factors can be also considered as protective factors depending on the mechanisms activated by the interaction between individuals and environment (Rutter, 1979), factors in this category are codified together. Class cohesion and student participation are considered the most relevant protecting or risk factors (contextual factors) by 38% of teachers; teachers' competences (cultural factors) are considered important by 21% of the sample, and personality (individual factors) by 12%.

Code 5. Consequences

Violence can have an impact both on organizational aspects and on teachers' health.

Many teachers (>= 30%) declare some consequences related to organizational and educational aspects, such as "Lost days of work", "Lost instructional time" and "Student disciplinary proceedings involving school, police, judicial systems, social services, and parents".

Moreover, 36% of teachers who experienced some form of school-related violence reports emotional distress and the difficulty of finding strategies to manage it.

Code 6. Measures to prevent and contrast the phenomenon

In this category teacher answers are polarized on two typologies: effective classroom management practices (45%) and promoting academic engagement (34%). An important aspect concerns teachers' preparation for managing school violence. In fact, 51% of the sample complains the lack of specific training to manage the problem. Teacher preparation should be an important area to develop for teachers' professional training, given that they lack of sufficient expertise and skill to manage the problem (Espelage et al., 2013).

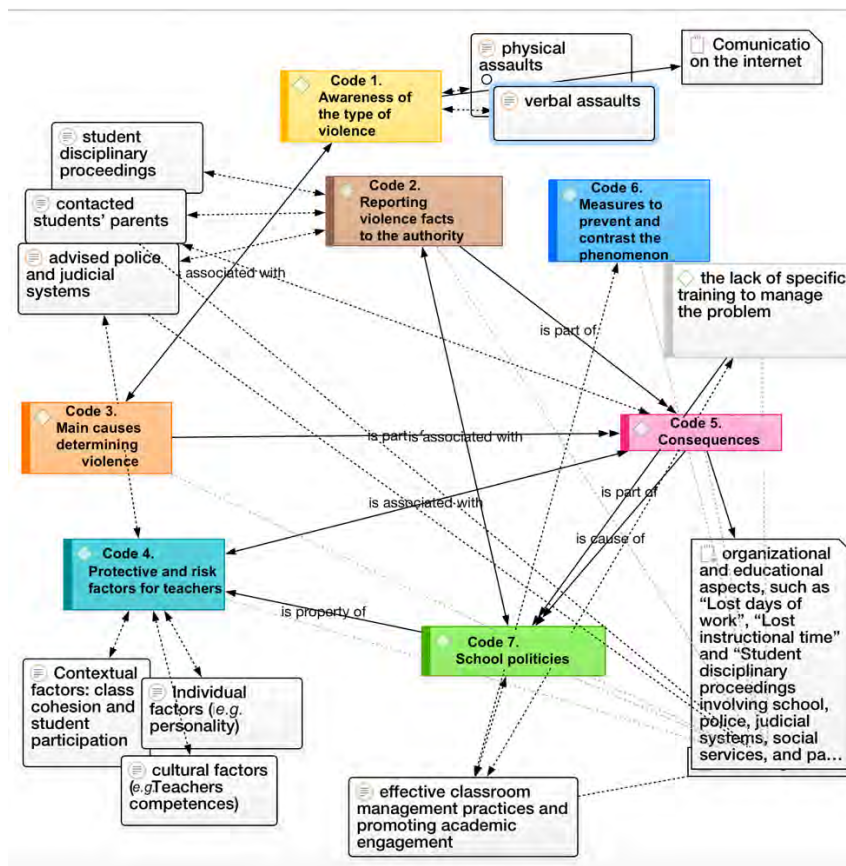
Code 7. School policies

For 58% of the teachers, school violence prevention programs are fundamental to manage the problem. Moreover, even though training is considered fundamental by teachers for their preparedness, it has to be part of a systemic approach developed by school institutions.

Figure 1 shows the seven categories represented semantically in network views, pointing out the interrelations and the main outcomes between data transcriptions.

Finally, several stepwise multiple regression analyses were carried out. The results ($p < .05$) show an influence of situational and social/environmental factors on teachers' perception.

Figure 1. Atlas.ti 7: A network presentation of the seven categories.



4. Conclusion and future work

Given the nature of our research design and its results, it seems reasonable to conclude that school management and socio-ecological school environment have significant predictive value for teachers' violence perception.

The outcomes show that situational and social/environmental factors are particularly important to teachers to understand the phenomenon of violence against them, thus favouring the idea that adoption of appropriate measures can be effective to tackle the problem. For this purpose, a systemic approach including a special training for teachers has to be developed by school institutions. These findings have to be interpreted in the light of the limitation represented by a small size of our sample. Nevertheless, the results are in accordance with a recent metanalysis (Longobardi et al. 2018) and literature review (Espelage et al., 2013, Gerberich et al., 2014; Mc Mahon et al., 2014). Finally, we think that teachers' involvement, given their awareness about the specific workplace context, is fundamental for the effectiveness of prevention programs (Corradini, Marano, Paolinelli, 2017).

We are planning to work with a larger sample and an extended questionnaire to investigate additional factors affecting violence against teachers in the school environment.

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