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ABSENT: The Violence of Austerity in Schools (Part 1) / ABSENCES : La violence de l'austérité à l'école (épisode 1)

INTRO

HOST: Welcome to the *ABSENT* series, brought to you by the Canadian Teachers Federation (CTF/FCE) Source Podcast. This investigative series uncovers the mystery of our public education crisis. This first episode is broken into two parts as we explore the broad and complex issues of violence in schools. We'll look at the history of the issue, new research, and how the rise in school-based violence is contributing to Canada's retention and recruitment crisis.

To respect the confidentiality of teacher and education workers, some testimonials that you'll hear are read by voice actors.

Cet épisode se déroulera en anglais et en français.

CONTENT WARNING: This episode does contain descriptions of workplace violence. See the episode description for support and resources, including information about Canada 9-8-8.

In this first of two parts on violence in schools, we're taking you on a bit of a voyage. What you'll hear are a patchwork of vignettes from dozens of interviews we've compiled. As we move from defining the issue to its causes, you'll hear from researchers, education leaders, and most importantly, the people that this is impacting the most, teachers and education workers from across Canada, including members of the CTF/FCE Advisory Committee on Indigenous Education. So, let's dive in.

WHAT: THE ISSUE

(**HOST:** To establish a definition of workplace violence in the context of education, we talked to two experts who've researched this topic extensively...)

Dr. Darcy Santor: My name is Darcy Santor. I am a professor of psychology at the University of Ottawa. I'm also a practicing clinical psychologist. My interests have been broad but have focused on mental health in both students as well as in the workplace.

Dr. Chris Bruckert: I'm Chris Bruckert. I'm a professor of criminology at the University of Ottawa. For most of my career, I have been looking at gendered violence, in one form or another, often workplace violence.

(**HOST:** Darcy and Chris initiated the Harassment and Violence Against Educators Project back in 2018. To date, the project has surveyed over 1,500 elementary school teachers – specifically Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) members – and over 3,000 Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) education sector workers, which includes education assistants, early childhood educators, and other staff such as custodians and clerical workers. These were some of their objectives...)

Dr. Darcy Santor: to better understand and communicate the results and impacts of harassment and violence that educators experience over the course of their year and also over the course of their careers.

(**HOST:** Now, back to the definition of workplace violence and harassment in the context of education...)

Dr. Darcy Santor: ...for example, **violent and threatening behavior** is the act, it's the attempt, or even the threat of use of physical force, whereas **workplace harassment** is unwelcome words or actions that are known or should be known, to be offensive, embarrassing, humiliating, traumatizing, demeaning, and so on, such as verbal insults, put downs, obscene gestures, disrespect, being ganged up as well as the threat of as well as the actual occurrence of false accusations.

(**HOST:** This definition is similar to the definition of workplace violence or harassment according to the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety. In this episode, we'll use the term school-based violence to refer to violence, aggression, and harassment occurring in schools. Now, what does violence and harassment look like in schools? To answer that question, we asked teachers and education workers from across the country. Here's what they had to say:)

Member of the CTF/FCE Advisory Committee on Indigenous Education: students throwing things students throwing like desks or throwing everything off the table and chairs and the rest of the class having to leave the room for safety reasons.

Preston, Member of the CTF/FCE Advisory Committee on Indigenous Education: the desk throwing for sure, swearing, disrespect is big right now.

Enseignant-e au secondaire : En travaillant avec un élève à très grands besoins, dont la violence était connue de mon employeur, j'ai reçu deux coups, l'un au visage et l'autre à l'épaule. Mon employeur jamais il ne m'a avisé du comportement de l'élève. Seulement que je devais porter un casque de hockey et une veste de protection rembourrée lorsque je travaillais avec lui. Malgré l'équipement de protection que je portais, j'ai eu une commotion cérébrale qui a duré près de deux semaines. Je suis encore effrayée quand mon employeur me demande de retourner travailler avec cet élève, car je sais que d'autres épisodes de violence surviendront. Je ne suis pas la seule victime de violence avec lui.

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TEACHER: Another student completely trashed my classroom. And would throw objects at me, stapled my teaching partner's hands. Slam doors, punched, kicked, spit, and name calling.

Elementary teacher: Aggression is definitely an issue in my school. We are seeing extreme behaviors in some of our youngest students. Tantrums, hitting, kicking, biting, and spitting. Some of those students have identified needs. Some do not. These behaviors are not only directed towards staff, but other students as well.

TYPES OF VIOLENCE AND WHO'S INVOLVED

Marie-Noel : Il va s'agir alors de violence verbale et un peu plus rarement de violence physique. Outre les violences verbales, il va s'agir de diffamation ou de harcèlement.

Marie-Noel : Je suis Marie-Noël Vercambre-Jacquot.

(**HOST:** She's an epidemiological researcher at the MGEN Foundation for Public Health in France.)

(**HOST:** She one of the authors of the International Barometer of Education Staff (commonly known as "I-BEST"), which surveys education staff of participating countries around the world on working conditions, well-being, and health. She explains that on the international stage, we're most commonly seeing verbal violence as well as harassment, with some instances of physical violence.)

Marie-Noel : Mais les parents ou les collègues sont aussi impliqués auteur de violences contre des personnels dans un cas sur dix.

(**HOST:** What we're seeing is school-based violence being inflicted towards education staff by students, parents, members of school staff, and other external to the school community. We'll hear more from her and the international perspective later on in the episode.)

Elementary teacher 2: So, I mean teaching in a primary school, you think maybe this only happens in high school or junior high, but no it does happen and you're seeing that's more prevalent in the younger grades as well.

(**HOST:** Regardless of the whether you're a primary or secondary teacher or education worker, school-based violence is prevalent. In fact, a 2020 report by the Alberta Teachers' Association on Understanding Aggression in Alberta Schools and Communities noted, "Elementary and middle school teachers reported higher levels of violence", Whereas high school teachers "reported higher levels of bullying and harassment." This finding in Alberta is consistent with a 2017 Ontario English

Catholic Teachers Association study. One reason being that this “may reflect older students’ increased levels of understanding and ability to manage their temper”, as well as “societal tolerance—for example, a 10-year-old will suffer few consequences from violent action, whereas a 16-year-old can face criminal charges. It may also relate more to external social conditions facing a teacher.”)

WHEN AND WHY: HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

(**HOST:** Unfortunately, this is not a new problem. CTF/FCE President, Heidi Yetman, joins us to take us back a few years and to fill us in on the background of violence in schools.)

Heidi Yetman: Violence in schools is not a new issue. And I remember in 2018, the CTF/FCE released this pan Canadian research review on violence in schools.

And it looked at publications dating back to 1998 and survey findings of over 40,000 teachers across Canada. And at that time, about 80 percent of them estimated that violence had increased over their careers. That's pretty sad. And as many as 94 percent of them also said that they had reported or experienced violence at some point in their career.

So, this report is from five years ago, the contributing factors to the rise in violence actually hasn't changed.

The Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario conducted an all-member survey on violence in 2017, again, showing violence was significant and was a growing problem.

And also, in 2018, the Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers reported violence against teachers is worrying,

And so, the problem isn't new. We go back to 2017, 2018, and teachers are saying that there's a problem with violence.

When you talk to teachers on the ground, they're talking about how their classes have become increasingly complex, a lack of support for addressing students with needs. There's a lack of assistance, there's a lack of psychologists, of professionals to support students that have learning difficulties or different learning experiences.

So, you know, it's there, **it's always been there** and it really is lack of funding, if you think about it. If students aren't getting what they need in the classroom, because there's not enough funding to supply those resources, then classrooms are more difficult. And so that's really what's happening, you know, I always say that teachers, their biggest concern is the success of students. And when you can't see that

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success because you don't have the resources to get that success, it becomes very difficult.

(**HOST:** Also in 2018, Chris and Darcy's research of ETFO members yielded some shocking findings.)

Dr. Chris Bruckert: What we found was really shocking to us and shocking to the general public and was probably not all that surprising to teachers you know, really high rates of violence, a really high rates of harassment, 54 percent of our respondents said they'd experienced an act of violence. There's really compelling evidence that this is increasing. I mean, as a criminologist, whenever I hear, oh, rates are going up, I usually think, oh, reporting rates are going up, or this is an artifact of the media. But, in this case, it seems to be legitimately increasing and at an almost unthinkable rate.

We also found that about **half of the teachers did not report their worst incidents of violence.**

Dr. Darcy Santor: So, we have found in both of these surveys that there are several reasons that educators and education sector workers give for not reporting instances of violence and harassment. And it ranges from: they do not see that it is sufficiently severe too there's no support from administrators to do something about it, to believing that it just will not make any difference to report that.

Heidi Yetman: Les gens, cachent qu'est ce qui se passe dans leur classe parce que c'est trop difficile ou qu'il n'y a pas de solution ou qu'ils n'ont pas le soutien de leur administration.

HOST: An education researcher, Dr. Melissa Corrente, at the University of Ottawa, also explains the important role of principals and vice-principals when it comes to addressing violent incidences.

Melissa Corrente: Teachers need to know they're going to be listened to and supported when violence is reported. Just an example, if a student throws a chair in a classroom or assaults another student and is sent to the office after having a conversation with leadership in the school or administration, if that student is then sent back to the classroom later in the day, or even the next day, it really leaves teachers feeling demoralized and powerless. So, it also sends a message to the other students that witnessed that incident in the classroom that it's okay to behave in this way and the consequences are minimal.

Dr. Chris Bruckert: So, by the best data we could get, it's about a sevenfold increase in 15 years.

Dr. Darcy Santor: This represents a very serious underestimation, then, if you're going to rely on the number of instances that are being reported, it also emphasizes the importance of conducting surveys, which speak to members directly with an aim to try to quantify how many folks are actually experiencing this and so on. A 7-fold increase from when these studies are first created is a remarkable change, which is quite alarming.

INCREASE IN VIOLENCE

Member of the CTF/FCE Advisory Committee on Indigenous Education: I will say I've witnessed it more regularly in the last few years. So, in the last few years, I've seen a lot more of it than I did in the past.

Preston, Member of the CTF/FCE Advisory Committee on Indigenous Education: it is prevalent more and more, especially this year. It started a lot last year and just kind of exponentially even more this year.

Elementary teacher 2: That was a really big concern for me last year Being pregnant and just knowing that the violence is escalating in the classrooms.

Kristen Ferguson: Our research shows violence in the classroom is frequent.

Marie-Noel : Cela fait une quinzaine de années que je travaille sur cette thématique de la santé des personnels de l'éducation et j'ai pu identifier, à partir de différentes sources de données, la montée en puissance de cette problématique.

(**HOST:** Marie-Noël explains that over the course of 15 years researching the health and wellbeing of education personnel, she's seen through various sources of data, the growing importance of this issue.)

Marie-Noel: L'éducation, c'est un métier de la relation et la violence va peser particulièrement sur le bien être des personnels de l'éducation.

(**HOST:** Education is a profession based on relationships, and violence has a particularly heavy impact on the well-being of education personnel.)

POST-PANDEMIC LANDSCAPE

(**HOST:** It's clear that violence in schools has been present for quite some time and it's increasing. So, where are we now? Here's President Yetman to give us an overview of the current landscape.)

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Heidi Yetman: In order to try to make sense of the landscape, the CTF/FCE recently partnered with Abacus Data. And our January 2024 poll shows that 86 percent of Canadians have concerns about the rising levels of violence in schools.

(**HOST:** According to the Nova Scotia Teachers Union 2023 membership survey, “approximately 87 per cent of Nova Scotia teachers and educational specialists believe that school violence has increased since 2018. Similarly, 92 per cent of those surveyed say they’ve witnessed violence first hand at school, while 55 per cent say they’ve been the victim of a violent act or threat while at work.”)

The Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario also surveyed their members on violence in the beginning of 2023. Here’s a clip from the press conference in May of last year.)

KAREN BROWN: The vast majority, 80 percent of ETFO members say that the number of violent incidents has increased since they began working in public education. The vast majority, 80 percent of ETFO members say that the number of violent incidents has increased since they began working in public education.

While 66 percent say that the severity is worse and alarming 77 percent of ETFO members say that they have personally experienced violence or witness violence against another staff person with experience of actual physical force and attempted physical force, being highest among those who work in kindergarten.

(PAUSE for ad break: **HOST:** We’ll be right back...We have a cousin podcast that we’d like to tell you about. It’s called Elementary, and it comes from the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario. From filmmakers challenging the privatization of education to students who are working to save the planet, to celebrating Black excellence, the Elementary podcast brings together students and educators, academics, and union activists for lively conversations that inform the practice and understanding of education. You can find Elementary on most podcast apps.)

(**HOST:** A 2024 report from the Alberta Teachers’ Association noted, “One in two (52 per cent) Alberta teachers and three in four (73 per cent) school leaders reported that they had experienced bullying or violence as part of their work since the beginning of the 2023/24 school year.” “47% of The New Brunswick Teachers’ Association teachers reported experiencing verbal or physical violence at work.” The Prince Edward Island Teachers’ Federation’s 2022-member survey reported “1 in 4 Island teachers surveyed have been harassed or felt unsafe because of their teaching profession.”)

(**HOST:** A recent news report by Faiza Amin and Meredith Bond at CityNews revealed the following:)

CityNews: A recent OSSTF survey revealed about 35% of teachers and nearly 80% of education assistants with the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation reported being the targets of physical aggression in schools.

(**HOST:** At a recent press conference, the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation 2023-member survey reported the following)

Samantha Becotte: 35.4% of respondents experienced violence in their working environment in the last five years, four out of five of them noted that they had experienced two to three instances in the last five years. 40% of teacher respondents reported workplace harassment in the last five years. Nearly nine out of 10 of those who have experienced harassment noted repeated occurrences.

(**HOST:** While there's a lot of data and evidence that captures the impacts of the pandemic on students, teachers, and education workers, there's still more to uncover. In the Fall of 2023, Darcy and Chris launched a new survey to build on their findings and study Violence and Harassment Against Education Sector Workers with a larger sample from across Canada to get a better understanding of the intersections among various elements of identity. They've received over 7,000 participants in the study, including members of OSSTF/FEESO, OECTA, ETFO, AEFO, STF, and CUPE National.)

(**HOST:** Now for the international perspective, let's go back to Marie-Noel to hear her insights.)

Marie-Noel : Le baromètre international de la santé et du bien-être du personnel de l'éducation est une enquête internationale qui a été développée par le Réseau éducation et solidarité et la Fondation d'entreprise pour la santé publique avec l'appui de l'Internationale de l'éducation et de la chaire Unesco éducation et santé.

(**HOST:** The International Barometer of Education Staff, or I-BEST, is a biennial survey affiliated with Education International. The 2023 edition surveyed 11 countries and territories across 4 continents, including: Canada, France, Spain, United Kingdom, Switzerland, Belgium, Argentina, Morocco, Cameroon, and Japan.)

Marie-Noel : Dans la plupart des onze territoires enquêtés, la très grande majorité des personnels se sentent en sécurité dans leurs établissements d'enseignement. Mais il y a quand même des signaux préoccupants dans certains pays, notamment au Maroc, au Cameroun. Au Canada, huit pour cent des personnels se sentent quand même rarement en sécurité et deux pour cent jamais. Donc ce sont des taux qui ne peuvent pas être minimisés alors que se sentir en sécurité, c'est un fondamental pour une éducation de qualité.

(**HOST:** That's 8% of Canadian respondents that rarely feel safe at work. This finding is important as feeling safe is fundamental to quality education.)

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Marie-Noel : On met en lumière une vraie banalisation de la violence interpersonnelle dans les établissements d'enseignement. Quarante pour cent du personnel a été victime de violences dans les douze derniers mois au Canada, c'est un chiffre énorme.

(**HOST:** In the past 12 months, 40% of Canadian respondents have been victims of workplace violence – This is the highest among all 11 participating countries.)

(**HOST:** We'll hear more from Marie-Noel in future episodes. For more information about the I-BEST results, check out the show notes for infographics and links to the full report.)

CAUSES

(**HOST:** Now all of this isn't happening by chance or in isolation. We asked teachers to share some possible causes for the rise in school-based violence.)

Member of the CTF/FCE Advisory Committee on Indigenous Education: especially in regard to students who are dysregulated, some may have had Some trauma in the past

Tesa, Member of the CTF/FCE Advisory Committee on Indigenous Education: young children are having police called on them because of their dysregulation. I think that there's a number of contributing factors that are causing the increase in violence. There's not enough staff in schools. There's not enough training. There's too many kids in a classroom.

Heidi Yetman: J'avais une classe de trente-quatre élèves avec cinq élèves avec des troubles de comportement, des troubles d'apprentissage graves et je n'étais pas formé pour répondre à leurs besoins et j'avais aucun support dans cette classe-là. Il n'y avait personne qui m'aidait dans cette classe mais ça n'a aucun sens qu'un enseignant se trouve dans une situation comme ça.

Elementary teacher: In my opinion, the violence in elementary schools that I've witnessed and been a part of in some cases is largely based on the student's inability to manage their own emotions and behavior. It's not intentional the way that criminal violence would be.

Secondary teacher: Because of school closures during COVID and a loss of human connection, unsurprisingly, secondary school students struggle with conflict management. Issues that would have been in previous years simply a heated conversation now become violent incidents as students choose violence to solve simple conflicts.

Elementary teacher: School staff are not adequately supported on so many fronts and in so many ways. Serving school situations and keeping in good favour with the public is such a struggle without proper supports. Frankly, every workplace and every worker has the right to not be threatened and harmed, but it really seems like that's not the case for teachers. It's really sad.

TEACHER: It can take up to three staff members at a time to monitor and follow an out-of-control student. We are regularly locked into our classroom and when a dysregulated student is being monitored in our hall. I know I feel unsettled after a direct encounter. I can't imagine how the classmates feel. We do not have the resources to meet the needs of all our students.

Education assistant: Things are out of hand with no support of teachers who want to add higher expectations for the classroom.

(**HOST:** The rise in violence that we're seeing in schools across Canada is a result of a myriad of reasons:

The 2020 ATA report found that "teachers with heavy teaching loads experience more bullying than other teachers [which reflects] the importance of having adequate time and teaching conditions to develop positive teacher-student relationships". The report also indicated "that 35 per cent of the incidents [of bullying] occurred online (through e-mail or social media)". It's important to note that cyberbullying isn't limited to the confines of time or space.

Heidi Yetman: and there's some more recent research as well. So, Example 2024 Alberta Teachers Association put out a report basically saying that a significant portion of both teachers and school leaders reported aggressive behaviors in schools and it has increased following the pandemic. The escalation has been partly attributed to growing societal divisions, increase of use of social media, and a decrease in student social emotional intelligence and level of maturity. All which have bred less empathy and less social awareness.

So, when you have students that have been out of the classroom for a couple of years and not learning to kind of live together, they've lost two years of social contact, which really has made an effect in the classrooms.

(**HOST:** What's the root of the problem?)

Heidi Yetman: Le gros problème en éducation c'est le sous financement. Ça c'est vraiment le gros problème. On ne finance pas les écoles comme il faut. Alors à cause de ça, on ne peut pas répondre aux besoins des élèves. Tu sais comme enseignant, notre but, c'est que les élèves ont du succès. Puis quand tu as un groupe d'élèves avec des problèmes de comportement, des problèmes d'apprentissage, puis il n'y a personne pour t'aider dans la classe, ça devient très difficile de voir le succès de tes

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élèves. Alors c'est vraiment important de financer l'école comme il faut. L'école publique a besoin de financement.

When we get right down to it, the problem is that we don't have a system that's well funded. You know, education is the base of a society. And for me personally, I really believe that it should be the number one priority in a society. Because if we can educate students, if we can educate the population, then in the long run it costs society a lot less. So, it's a shame.

Resource teacher: And I want to be clear, students are not to blame. The government is for failing them time and time again, especially those who are most vulnerable. Violence in schools is not a new issue, it's not a special education issue, and it's not about individual students. Behavior is communication. Sometimes students engage in violence as a way to communicate that they are overwhelmed.

(**HOST:** In a recent press conference held by the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, an elementary teacher shared her experience of violence. Last year, she was attacked by a student and suffered a broken nose and a severe concussion. She says quote "I do not blame the student for what happened. I blame the system and the continued lack of government support that continues to let the [students] fall through the cracks," end-quote.)

(**HOST:** CHRIS REITERATED THIS THEME...)

Dr. Chris Bruckert: In fact, I would argue the genesis of the violence that we're seeing in schools has nothing to do with the Children. In fact, I would say the Children are also victims of a system that has absolutely denied them access to the mechanisms to meet their needs. And Children act out in violence when they run out of words, when they run out of strategies, when they're frustrated. This is not because they are mean or evil or perpetrators.

It means because **their needs aren't being met**. And so, we have to ask, why aren't their needs being met? And it's not because we have bad teachers or uncaring EAs. Far from it. They're doing what they can, but they don't have the tools and those tools have been systematically stripped away by one government after another. You cannot keep asking people to do more with less and expect there not to be a cost at the end of the road.

At the end of the road, it's our children who are paying the cost and then by extension teachers who are paying the cost for cuts in health care, cuts in supports in schools, cuts in the ability to diagnose issues, increase in class size, getting rid of psychologists and social workers.

The end result is frustrated children who are latching out and they are latching out at their EAs. There aren't enough EAs, there aren't enough teachers. So, then the child themselves doesn't have anyone to turn to. Their needs aren't being met.

Dr. Darcy Santor: As a psychologist, much of the aggression that is witnessed and experienced is going to be the result of frustration that is experienced by kids who do not have or are not sufficiently equipped to cope with their frustration in an adaptive way. Frustration is the turning point, and there are several things that contribute to that. **Students are showing up with increased mental health needs.** If they are arriving in school without the kinds of academic and learning supports that they need, then their frustration that they experience throughout the day and the year is going to be substantially higher.

On top of that, if they are not provided with the kinds of skills or taught the kinds of skills that are necessary to express frustration in an adaptive way, then it's likely that they're going to act out that frustration in a way which leads to aggression and violence.

(HOST: In short, what is the underlying cause?)

Dr. Chris Bruckert: Cutbacks. You know, I would call this actually the violence of austerity. I would think that the violence we're seeing in school is an artifact of the violence of austerity and the children are victims as much as the educators. And the solution isn't simply to pour more money into it, I think the solution or what needs to happen is very careful attention to how we can address Children's needs and pour funding into that.

But clearly making class sizes 33 children, putting 30 kindergartens, four- and five-year-olds in one room. That's a recipe for ensuring that children are frustrated. And, of course, over the last 15 years, we have seen more and more austerity measures, more and more cutbacks, both to healthcare and to education, and I think the two, at this situation, are often interconnected.

Melissa Corrente: It comes down to teachers being expected to do more with less.

Dr. Chris Bruckert: I think the truth of the matter is that schools are in crisis. We are at a crisis point and things are not going to get better all by themselves. If things don't change, they are going to get worse. And I think the structural elements, in terms of austerity measures, which I really believe is the root of the issue.

But I think we can also look at what's happening in our society. We have an affordable housing crisis. We've had two years of lockdown where Children were denied the ability to maybe learn social skills. So, the needs are probably increasing at the same time as not only are resources stagnating, they're actually declining.

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So, this is absolutely a recipe for disaster. And I am truly scared about what this is going to look like in five and 10 years if we don't do something dramatic, like this to me is truly frightening.

IMPACTS: MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH

(HOST: What we're heard from the research is that violence isn't isolated to just teachers and in fact, educational assistants (EA) have also experienced a dramatic rise in violence. Here's an EA testimonial read by Dr. Melissa Corrente:)

Educational assistant: I was attacked by one of the autism students. We were having rising aggression from this student. He exploded at me and batted me around the head with his hand, hit me back and forth on the side of my head.

He tried to get past me to exit the classroom. I blocked the door. And in doing that, he jabbed my arm and sprained my wrist. I was off work for a couple of days with WSIB claim. In hindsight, now I came back far too quickly. I went for counseling because after I recovered physically, I went to go back to work and had a couple panic attacks.

(HOST: Violence impacts educators in many ways, and research shows that educator's mental health is definitely part of the equation.)

Dr. Chris Bruckert: The other thing we found, which was really surprising was the impact of this violence, right? We think of impact in terms of obviously injuries, physical injuries, mental injuries, costs, lost days but the truth is quite simply that violence ripples through the lives of these teachers and it affects everything. It affects their home life. It affects their relationship with their children. It affects their experience with the children. And of course, we could talk about the impact on the children in the classroom and what they're experiencing. So, the impact is far beyond what's easily measurable and that's actually quite horrible what we can measure, but you know, it can't be measured in concussions and lost days and broken bones. The costs are much higher than that.

Dr. Darcy Santor: In these surveys, we also asked educators and education sector workers to **talk about their mental health**. So that could actually estimate the relationship between mental health, physical health, their perceptions of being able to do their job well, and their commitment to their jobs as it relates to the experience around harassment and violence. And what we found was, not surprisingly, that the more physical violence that you experience, the more harassment that you experience, you also report lower levels of mental health, poor mental health, poor physical health, and an erosion of your ability to do your job well.

We also asked folks about in the study examining education sector workers about the prevalence of PTSD symptoms, as well as the prevalence of burnout, and we found that about 18 percent of individuals reported elevated levels of PTSD symptoms following a worst instance of harassment, 13 percent following their worst instance of violence. In terms of burnout, 7 percent reported that they were burned out already. Another 7 percent said they were at high risk for burnout. That represents one in six education sector workers who are at risk or who are burned out.

(HOST: We've heard about the negative impacts of violence on teachers' mental health, but to delve a bit deeper on the topic, we also spoke to 2 education researchers on the Healthy Professional Worker Partnership: Dr. Kristen Ferguson and Dr. Melissa Corrente...)

Kristen Ferguson: As a part of a larger study among seven professions across Canada between November 2020 and May 2021, we surveyed education workers about their experiences with mental health, and we had over 1000 education workers respond, including teachers, educational assistants, and early childhood educators.

We also conducted a follow up interview with 53 education workers to hear their stories. And interviewed 26 Canadian education stakeholders and groups.

(HOST: We asked Kristen and Melissa about what the research says regarding the link between school-based violence and mental health. Here's what they had to say:)

Kristen Ferguson: Well, first off, the sheer pervasiveness of violence in schools is striking. Over 8 percent of our education workers reported experiencing violence daily or weekly, with another 5 percent experiencing violence monthly and 25 percent once a year. The experiences are overwhelmingly student on teacher violence, with over 95 percent of teachers stating that the source of the violence was from students.

This disturbingly common occurrence of violence in the classroom ties into mental health of educators as the research has overwhelmingly shown that violence is becoming normalized and as, quote, part of the job. The research also shows that the psychological impact of violence lingers much longer than the physical wounds do. Our study also found that those education workers experiencing violence were almost twice as likely to report having a mental health issue at the time of our survey. **So, we, as other researchers, have certainly found a clear link between mental health and classroom violence.**

Melissa Corrente: We're also really concerned about what kind of debriefing, if any, is happening in the school system for teachers, EAs, ECEs, for other students and support staff who are witnessing violence in the school setting because we need to

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remember that violence affects everyone differently. And just because a student was the one who threw the chair, everyone in the room is impacted by that act.

RETENTION AND RECRUITMENT

(**HOST:** Now, what happens to the teaching profession when mental health is deteriorating, violence is rising, yet supports are declining? Let's hear some more teacher testimonials.)

Secondary teacher: What broke my heart last spring was to hear how student teachers inform their associate teachers at the end of the practicum that they have no intent to apply for teaching jobs, as it was far more violent and far more awful than they've been led to believe.

Elementary teacher: My partner, who is a teacher, has just taken a leave because of the persistent violence by one six-year-old in her class. She has pulled her hair, hit her, punched and kicked students, thrown a metal water bottle at a teacher's head, and trashed the class on a daily basis. When she starts trashing the classroom, the entire class is evacuated and relocated, sometimes multiple times a day.

The student did the same thing last year, and her kindergarten teacher and ECE both went on leave. Then, in grade 1, she was given no EA support and somehow expected a different result? Class composition and EA support are critical.

Heidi Yetman: Lors de ma première année d'enseignement, j'ai enseigné les arts visuels à un groupe très difficile de secondaire un, ça s'appelait présecondaire. Et deux garçons dans ce groupe-là se sont battus physiquement. Il fallait que je les sépare avec mes mains, alors je les ai séparés. Puis on est allé voir la direction d'école. En tant que nouvelle enseignante, ça m'a vraiment fait peur et je ne m'attendais pas à devoir face à une situation comme ça. Et je n'étais pas préparé pour cette situation-là. Alors les nouvelles enseignantes et enseignants, c'est quelque chose quand vous êtes face à une situation de violence comme ça.

Elementary teacher 2: It was very very hard as a first-year teacher, and I felt like I didn't have that support again, because a large number of students, we didn't have in class support from, like, student assistants or anything like that. It was just extremely hard when you had incidents in the classroom to ensure that you had that extra support to either watch the other students or to help. Maybe deescalate something that is going on.

TEACHER: I currently teach in a grade one class and have been on medical leave since the start of November. I was given a new student with a traumatic background of violent outbursts and spitting, but my class already had three students with undiagnosed but suspected autism spectrum disorder, and I had no educational

assistance support. I had to evacuate my class at least three times per week, and the only communication I was getting from admin was that there wasn't enough funding for more EA support.

Secondary teacher: violence in schools is getting worse. We have more staff on leave as a result of assault from students this year than any other.

(HOST: These teacher testimonials bring to light the fact that the increase in school-based violence is a contributing factor of the retention crisis. Research also shows the link between increasing violence and teachers leaving the profession. Here's what they had to say:)

Kristen Ferguson: our research does support that workplace violence is indeed a significant reason that they are considering leaving the job. when we look further into the lives of education workers beyond using their sick days and beyond taking a leave of absence to cope with mental health and with the violence that they're experiencing, we really do see the ramifications of violence in the classroom to the school system. **In our study, we found that both experiencing workplace violence and suffering from a mental health issue predicted education workers not only leaving an organization like a board or a school, but also leaving the profession entirely.**

(HOST: The NSTU also found in their recent all-member survey that rising levels of school violence is among the top reasons teachers gave for potentially quitting.)

Dr. Darcy Santor: In the context of talking about retention of educators within the profession, this extraordinarily high level of burnout likely contributes in part to these challenges that everyone's experiencing with retaining educators. These mental health impacts are extremely serious. It's not an isolated experience. This is something that characterizes most educators' weeks, from the very first week through to the very end, year after year. This is now part of the profession.

Teachers are coming out of retirement to staff shortages as well as including Students who are becoming educators, but who are not yet qualified to become educators. This is not a solution that is going to lead to the kinds of results that we need. We need to retain the teachers who are there day in and day out. We need to increase them.

If I were to tell you as a new teacher that you should experience one form or another of harassment and violence some 50 times over the course of a year, each and every year throughout your entire career. Would you take the job? We have heard from a number of educators towards the ends of the career that they're just hanging on. We have heard from a number of educators from that they, this is not the job that they signed up to do.

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Heidi Yetman: Teachers are leaving the profession. And less people going into education. They're not lining up at the university to become teachers. So, retention and recruitment, all of this could be fixed if we actually invested in education.

(**HOST:** Retention is only one side of this issue. When we asked some of our teacher members what they thought about highlighting the issue of violence, they thought that it's important to talk about it because teachers shouldn't feel blindsided when walking into the profession and they can be prepared to address student needs.)

Elementary teacher 2: I feel like it's very important to talk about it because I reflect back on those first few years as a new teacher and **coming in and basically being blindsided** and not knowing that this is something to expect, and now that it's more prevalent, I feel like it needs to be talked about.

I know there is a stigma around it but it's very important to talk about it to especially help those first-year teachers so when they come in, they're not blindsided like I felt I was, maybe have some of those supports in place for new teachers and seasoned teachers as well. I mean, I was 10 years in like last year and I still struggled with how to deal with a lot of these things.

So, I think it's really important to start the conversation, to keep the conversation going and for people to know that it is okay to talk about it. Because how can you solve these issues if it's not something that is talked about and brought to the forefront?

Member of the CTF/FCE Advisory Committee on Indigenous Education: And if it's not brought to the forefront, how will anybody know what other training we should have by entering the classroom?

GENDER AND EQUITY PERSPECTIVES

Elementary teacher 2: I was pregnant, and I had some aggressive students and there were other aggressive students in the school. So, it was always in the back of my mind. Am I going to, is my baby safe? Am I safe? Am I going to have to flee because the students are attacking me?

Kristen Ferguson: We spoke with another classroom teacher who was pregnant at the time of our interview and at the time that she was experiencing classroom violence, and she came to a point where she decided that she needed to take a leave of absence in order to protect herself and her unborn child from the violence she was experiencing.

(HOST: Teaching is a predominately female profession; According to Statistics Canada data from 2021-2022, about 74% of Canadian educators identify as female. Let's see what the data has to say about the intersection of gender and violence.)

Dr. Chris Bruckert: my focus has always been on gendered violence. So, to me, workplace violence in and of itself is a gendered issue. Because if you look at what populations are most at risk of workplace violence, we always think of police, we think of firefighters, but actually it's healthcare workers, education workers, and social workers. So, three women dominated areas. Interestingly, rates of violence against education sector workers are going up dramatically, WSIB data absolutely supports that, but it's particularly going up for women. So, the line is not consistent. Education is a woman dominated field, and it's one of the most violent occupations. So, there you go, that makes it a gendered issue.

(HOST: The 2023 ETFO all-member survey reported a similar finding)

KAREN BROWN: The research shows women are more likely to have experienced physical force or an attempt of physical force than men.

(HOST: Chris also spoke about gendered responses to and impacts of violence, as well as who is more vulnerable to violence and reprisals.)

Dr. Chris Bruckert: We could talk about the response to the violence, right? So, what's the response when women are sexually assaulted? Well, it's what did you wear? What did you do wrong? And we see the exact same response when educators experience violence. They are blamed, what did you do wrong? What didn't you do? Why were you in the way? So, this blaming, we also see a normalization and minimization, which is again the same response we see to gendered violence more broadly, right? So, you know, how bad can it really be? It's a kindergarten student.

We could also think about how **the impact is gendered**. When women talked about the impact, they talked very much about the impact rippling through their lives, it affected how they were with their children, it affected their relationships, it affected their ability to mother, and perhaps that's simply an artifact of women's, you know, continuing to do more of the home and childcare, but it certainly seemed to have an impact at that level.

I do think the impact and how male and female, or women and men, teachers navigate violence, like not only are **women dramatically more likely to be blamed**, but also, they're much more likely to sort of take that blame on themselves. So, there seems to be some kind of a **gendered response**, so the women seem to take it home with them and think about it, whereas the men seem to be, and again, this is a "Quali" data finding, so it's not hard data, but the men seem to be much better at saying, you know, I did my best, I'm leaving it at the school door.

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The other thing, **vulnerability to violence**. So, I don't think a child is going to target an individual because of their identity markers, because I don't think children are actually targeting anyone. I think they're acting out of frustration and whoever's in front of them is going to be the recipient. But when we're looking at other kinds of violence, harassment, violence from parents, for example, which is actually shockingly high, we do find that identity markers really impact that. So, you know, racially minoritized educators are three times more likely to experience violence from parents. That's dramatic.

And we also see it in **reprisals**. And so, Darcy said, people don't want to report because they're fearful of reprisals. In fact, 10 percent experience reprisals. But when you look at exactly who experienced reprisals, we find that not everyone's equally vulnerable to reprisals, right? And that racially minoritized teachers, for example, experience much higher rates, in fact, double the rate of reprisals. Disabled women experience higher rates of reprisals. So, there's all sorts of different things going on.

So, I think we need to attend to the experience of educators, and then we need to think about how the vulnerability, The response and the impact is impacted by individuals in identity markers.

(HOST: Again, ETFO all-member survey reported a similar finding:)

KAREN BROWN: Persons with disability, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit members, and 2SLGBTQ plus members are more likely to have experienced an attempt of physical force. A majority of persons with a disability and First Nations, Métis, and Inuit members have experienced actual physical force against them.

(HOST: The following testimonial from Preston Huppie, a member of the CTF/FCE Advisory Committee on Indigenous Education, illustrates these findings.)

Preston, Member of the CTF/FCE Advisory Committee on Indigenous Education: Me being Indigenous as well and having, you know, drumming and then students, making those kinds of comments that are I guess toward not only me, but also just the culture itself.

(HOST: Preston also spoke about how violence impacts him as an Indigenous educator.)

Preston, Member of the CTF/FCE Advisory Committee on Indigenous Education: when I see, violence or even, two students going at it or anything happening, some of my traumas are triggered.

I lose breath, basically I go into my fight, flight or freeze because basically how I was growing up, it was same thing, right? I was hit, beaten as well. And it's hard. I go into

my anxiety ways, and I don't know how to handle it. So, if I had the training, nonviolent intervention training, or even some kind of support to build the confidence in me, that's just more about my mental health as an Indigenous person, or my mental health to say, you know, what can I do when violent things happen.

I'm not a violent person. Maybe that's why I'm not giving discipline to kids either, because I don't do that even to my kids. And I don't want to do that, obviously, as an educator as well, even to raise my voice, I don't like to do that.

HOW: COLLECTIVE AGREEMENTS

HOST: Now we know that teachers' working conditions are determined by what's in their collective agreement, but what exactly does this mean? Essentially, collective agreements are the structures that give teachers their rights, and if something is not in there, teachers are not protected.

So, what are included (or are *not* included) in collective agreements pertaining to violence in schools across the country?

We're now pleased to welcome **Mischa Terzyk**, who is more commonly known as living and breathing collective agreements, and professionally known as **the CTF/FCE Director of Teacher Welfare and Collective Bargaining**.

Hi Mischa, can you break it down for us.

Mischa: First of all, it is important to say that schools are different workplaces. This is a workplace where you have adults and children present, and in some cases really small children. So, your typical laws against violence wouldn't really cover a school as these laws govern whatever happens at a mall or in a public place. So, schools are different.

So, we've looked at collective agreements of teacher unions across the country and we've found violence measures appear in multiple collective agreements, in some cases on local, in some cases provincial agreements. They look like reporting tools or where you have a sentence that says teachers have a right to a violence free work environment, but they're rather simple statements.

While there is some language around workplace violence and collective agreements, this is only the tip of the iceberg. Language needs to be much more specific, and solutions oriented. Although there is some acknowledgement that violence in school is an issue, it does not necessarily address the issue at hand, which is underfunding.

Inadequate resourcing simply means that student needs are not being met. If you don't have the provincial agreement or language in place. Then you don't have the

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provincial territorial funding locked up. And that's really what the issue is here. As a starting point, ministries of education need to acknowledge that under resourcing the public system directly contributes to school based violence.

(HOST: That said, teacher unions have stepped in to fill the gaps...)

Mischa: You have the BCTF that has put together health and safety booklet, for example. The Alberta Teachers' Association has put out a study on aggression, how to address that. The ETFO in Ontario has a violence prevention strategy, but obviously. It is always better if workers and employers come together and agree on a strategy, put money into a project and try to address a problem. And this is why It would be good to have more of this kind of language and not just mere simple commitment, because unfortunately, we've seen this is an issue that continues to be a problem. It was a problem before the covid pandemic, and now it's come back in full force and with a generation that obviously went through a pandemic and is dealing with trauma. And this is why it's important, and this is why I hope work in this area continues.

TESTIMONIALS

(HOST: As we look at testimonials that we've gathered. President Yetman recalls a series of testimonials from teachers across Canada. A warning that the details are shocking.)

Heidi Yetman: It was actually quite difficult to listen to, to tell you the truth. One teacher in particular talked about all the things that were happening in her classroom, including scratches, bites, objects being thrown. And in her case a metal water drinking container was thrown at her head. And she suffered a concussion. She had to go to the hospital. And she's since had to have plastic surgery on her face. Unbelievable, if you think about it. And these are elementary students. They're small children that are suffering. We have to look at it that way too, right? It's not just the teachers that are suffering. The students are suffering. and testimonial after testimonial of things that are happening in the classrooms that, like I said, are quite remarkable and quite disturbing, to tell you the truth. So, yeah that's what we're hearing.

At the **Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario**, I attended last summer their annual general meeting. And I would say that most of the teachers that got up and spoke at that meeting were talking about the increase in violence in their classrooms, one after the other. And you could hear it in their voice that, you know, being a teacher today, especially in an elementary school, is not easy. It's really difficult work. I mean, it's difficult work no matter what, but to have these kids that don't have the supports that they need and hearing from teachers about what's going on the ground is heartbreaking.

(**HOST:** The following testimonials moves from East to West across the country. You'll also notice that there are some common themes in their stories.)

Elementary teacher 2: It was kind of like walking on eggshells every day because you didn't know what was gonna trigger the student.

Resource teacher: This amounts to always feeling like I'm walking on eggshells and never being able to relax into my day.

Preston, Member of the CTF/FCE Advisory Committee on Indigenous Education: thinking about the impact of the way we approach teaching now, we definitely change. my teaching approach is now, you know, walking on eggshells. So, we do have a different approach when we have deregulated students.

OUTRO

HOST: Thanks for tuning in to our first episode of the ABSENT series. Stay tuned for part 2 as we explore possible solutions to the issues discussed in this episode, as well as what the CTF/FCE is doing to advocate about the issue, and how you can take action.

Check out the show notes for additional resources and links to the research reports mentioned throughout the episode.

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