Violence towards teaching/classroom assistants in mainstream UK schools

## Research findings and recommendations

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A. The Research Project

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

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

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

53% of teaching/classroom assistants had experienced physical violence in the previous year.

60% had experienced verbal abuse.
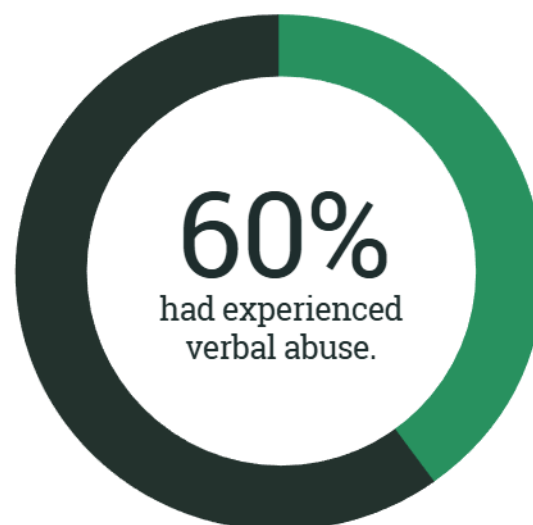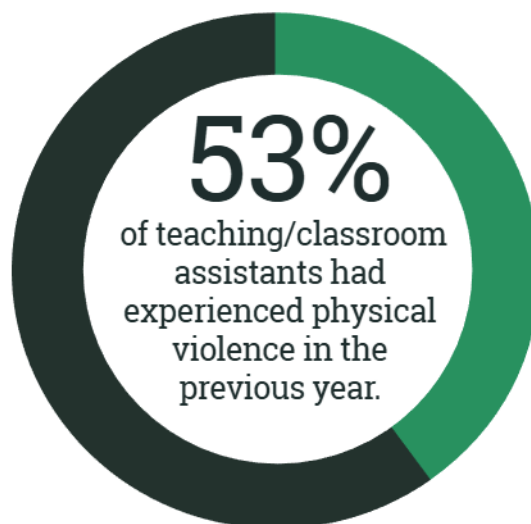
1. See **FE News** (2021) | 2. See **Unison** (2016).

Methods

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

Participants

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

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(Joanna)

B. Key findings

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- The size of the school and its impact on pupil behaviour (one school was described as 'organised chaos')

- Poor management and leadership (for example, new interim heads coming and going, and the continual upheaval this created caused stress and anxiety for staff which then impacted children)

- Financial constraints, cost-cutting and, in particular, a reduction in teaching/classroom assistants (which increased the risk of harm for those who stayed on)

- Policy change, particularly in relation to processes of academisation where restorative practices such as nurture groups were replaced with strict behaviour policies and the introduction of restraint techniques.

ii) What were the impacts of the violence?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Participants noted that the students often faced no sanctions following a violent incident towards them, and yet sanctions would be put in place if a teacher or senior manager had been assaulted. This discrepancy made participants feel unsupported and un-valued, and raised concerns about the message this would send to students about the acceptability of such violence, particularly towards a staff group who were pre-dominantly female, low paid and experienced low professional status[3]. If any sanctions were applied – for example, through

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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(Jane)

C. Recommendations for schools

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

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

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Recommendations for good practice following a violent incident

1) Every incident of student violence or aggression towards school staff should be reported and logged, with time given to staff within their working hours to do this. Staff members should always be given a copy of the report form.

2) The student should be immediately separated from the staff member, who should be given a safe space (or sent home) to recover. Staff members should not be expected to continue working with the student until an appropriate resolution process has been completed satisfactorily.

3) Staff members should be encouraged to seek a medical check-up following a violent incident.

4) Statements should be taken from the staff member, the student, and any witnesses and an investigation should be undertaken (by an independent party), with the outcome decision reported in a timely manner.

5) Care should be taken to avoid making blaming or accusatory comments towards the victimised staff member, particularly prior to the conclusion of any investigation.

6) Restorative practice should be implemented where appropriate to enable both the staff member and the student to experience closure. A meeting based on restorative principles will enable both sides to communicate their feelings about the incident, facilitate mutual understanding and allow for learning to take place.

7) Psychological/counselling support should be made available to any staff member who experiences a violent incident.

8) Staff members should be encouraged to take leave on full pay if they are experiencing physical or psychological injuries as a result of a violent incident.

Wider institutional changes

9) Schools should invest in and value the important role that teaching/classroom assistants do, and reflect this in their pay and in providing ongoing CPD and training opportunities (particularly when requested).

10) Schools should establish a specific support fund for training/course attendance for support staff to help keep themselves safe.

11) Support staff should be enfranchised in processes for both preventing violence (e.g. contributing to risk assessments) and following an incident (e.g. contributing to the decision-making process of how the school should best respond).

12) There needs to be a culture change that addresses current 'us and them' divisions between teaching staff and support staff, which is damaging to an inclusive school ethos.

13) Schools should provide regular whole-school training on how to respond to student aggression and violence towards all staff members (regardless of staff role/status)

14) Schools should develop a clear and unambiguous whole-school policy on student violence that is produced in collaboration with all stakeholders: Headteachers, HR, teachers, support staff, governors and unions. This should be reviewed regularly.

15) It is questionable whether restraint techniques are appropriate or effective in many of the situations we heard about as part of this research. However, if restraint techniques are to be used in a school, then the whole school should be trained in using them, with opt-outs available for staff members on health or other grounds (e.g. risk of re-traumatisation)