

Violence Against Teachers. Teachers at Risk: Is Teaching in Ordinary Schools in Norway Risky?

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This paper is based on the theme “Challenge of violence against teachers. The loss of safety”.

A small report in a Norwegian newspaper.

Student threatened teacher out of work

After a 16 year old (pupil) took a stranglehold on him and threatened to “smash his face”, a maths teacher took sick leave until the pupil quit the school. In a sentence from Jæren court the 17 year old pupil was sentenced to a 35 day suspended prison sentence, including two years probation, after the incident last January. After having completed a double lesson, the teacher left the school premises. His sick leave lasted the rest of the year, and he changed to another type of work afterwards. It appears from the verdict that the boy would have been sentenced to a custodial sentence if he had been older. (Norsk Telegram Byrå, 2008)

The newspaper report is an appropriate illustration of what my issue will focus on, namely the risk of teaching, which I claim, is a neglected one. In this paper I will limit myself to discussing only one group of professionals and what risks they are exposed to and their loss of safety when exposed to violent acts or threats from pupils. The brief report deserves to be at the front page, and from the little information we get, we can understand that a personal catastrophe in the professional life of one teacher has taken place. I think such small notes- of similar content may be found in many newspapers all over the Western World. This paper will dwell somewhat more on what is not disclosed in such a brief newspaper report as the example above.

I will draw on my own interviews with 14 different teachers to exemplify some of the points. Otherwise, the paper is based on books that I have read during the last years. This subject caught my attention when I myself worked as a teacher in primary and upper secondary schools for some years between two college jobs. The focus has traditionally been on students, while teachers often have been an ignored group when it comes to research on health situations relating to exposure to violence. I will in this paper try to bring teachers into focus and see how some of them react as individuals and how institutions where they work and society perceive their situation when confronted with risk when carrying out their daily teaching work. My informants have been chosen by “the snowball-effect”: hearing of one, leading in turn to hearing of other cases. I do not claim their cases to be representative of the general situation for teachers in Norway.

2. Definitions

I limit myself to just defining the word violence, since that concept is the basis for my approach to risk, safety and trust. “With violence we think of conduct with a physical and mental use of force against people or objects. Violence and aggressive conduct are corresponding concepts” (Lundström, 2006, p. 25). The author goes on to claim that both more serious and minor incidents are included and that it is the exposed who are the ones to judge. It is for the one exposed to decide whether the act might be categorized as violence (2006, pp. 14-15).

Another definition of violence is from the WHO:

The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation. (WHO, 2002)

To further elaborate on the definition of violence, I will use the book *Arbeid med vold og trusler (Working with violence and threats)* (Koren, 2000) as a basis for defining and categorizing threats and violence.

Violence:

Expressive violence: The intent is to inflict damage in order to express one's rage.

Violence on purpose: Using violence purposely to reach a goal: war, robbery.

Misplaced violence: When rage felt against society in general is directed towards a teacher, social worker, general practitioner, police, etc.

Provoked violence: When violence results from the victim's irony, threats, use of violence, or insults.

Threats:

Open: "I am going to get you"

Disguised: "So you dare to cycle home today"

Verbal threats. Threats people say to each other.

Physical threats: Conduct, which one experiences as threatening.

Below are listed some examples of violence or threats of violence I found in my material: I do not include any consequences of the listed acts, or categorize them according to the list above.

1. *Punched in the face by a twelve year old boy, without any obvious reason.*
2. *A blow towards the head when trying to interrupt two fighting pupils.*
3. *Hit on top of his head with a heavy iron bar.*
4. *Kicked in her ribs by a 9 year old pupil.*
5. *Telling the teacher he would end up in hospital if they met outside the school premises.*

6. *Strong arguments between a teacher and student where the teacher had the impression that the student was on drugs, which she experienced as threatening, knowing the student's history of being expelled due to violence.*
7. *"Defamation via the net"; students putting a female teacher on a sex site on the Internet, with full name and correct address, requesting younger sex-partners.*
8. *Telling a teacher he will experience his fist (demonstrating)*
9. *Telling a female teacher "you little whore! (...) I will come to get you!"*
10. *Telling a teacher he can do or say whatever he wants and declaring he will bring a blunt instrument to school and smash (Norwegian: "mose") the teacher's limbs.*

None of these above mentioned examples are acts that we could expect any employee to accept. Koren states very clearly in his book that threats and violence are unacceptable, no matter in which context they appear (2000, p. 19).

3. Numbers. How many and is it increasing?

I doubt that teaching has traditionally been considered a risky occupation in peaceful countries. What is a fact however is that surveys show that an increasing proportion of teachers are reporting being threatened or are the victims of violence. 57 % of teachers in Norway have during the last 5 years been in a situation involving violence or threatening situations in their school (Utdanningsforbundet, 2005). This is slightly higher than the average employee in Norway. In 2000 10 % of teachers reported to having been threatened or actually exposed to violence a couple of times per month. This was up from 6 % in 1989 and 8 % in 1993 (Holte & Grimsmo, 2006). Grimsmo (2001) some years ago argued that teachers to a greater extent than other occupations experience acts which are characterized as violence.

This number is rather high compared to a US report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics which shows that of a population of 3,704,000 teachers, less than 10 % have during the last 12 months been "threatened with injury" or "physically attacked" (Statistics, 2006). However, I find around 35,000 teachers in the US alone to be alarmingly high. In Denmark there is a trade union for police, teachers, nurses, recreational therapists and social workers, which reported (Møller Christiansen, 2005) an increase from 11 % to 21 % of those reporting have been subject to violence at work. This represents an increase of almost 100 %. The question asked was whether an employee had been subject to violence during the last 12 months.

In a Google search, I have obtained figures from many countries, counties and school districts. (Google search: “violence against teachers», «attacks against teachers”, “school violence”). Common to all of them is that on these sites the number of violent acts in schools has shown an increase over the last year. For instance, in Belfast (McBride, 2007) figures show a 57 % increase of physical attacks over the previous year. Similar numbers can be found in many areas in Scotland, England, Ireland, Portugal and the US.

Is this increase an actual one, or is it due to better routines of registration and/or obtaining greater attention? These facts are uncertain in Norway (Pape & Stefansen, 2004). There generally seems to be a trend to report violations more often than before. In Denmark (Balvig, 2000, p. 30) figures show that during only during a period of fifteen years people have reported physical aggression to the police twice as often as before. Gittins (2006) states that there is little evidence that violence is escalating even though recent episodes and the media generally draw another picture.

Other occupations than teaching exposed to violence are those of taxi drivers, bank employees, prison warders, parking assistants, medical doctors, city bus drivers and shop assistants (Koren, 2000). A Swedish researcher, who studied warders at psychiatric institutions, found that 31 % had been subject to violent acts during the past year. He refers to another study which reports that 73.7 % of nurses/wardens had been subject to violent acts during the last 12 months (Lundström, 2006, p. 13) . Balvig goes on to describe how there appears to be a kind of existential anxiety, where the questions “Who can I trust? Who may I confide in? Who can I reveal myself to totally? Who is on my side?” are making us more uncertain, and possibly making us more readily report violent incidents. Balvig calls it ‘existential loneliness’ (Balvig, 2000, p. 39).

In my data, which consists of fourteen in-depth interviews with teachers who have been assaulted or threatened, it is obvious what Harré (1998) states: “No two people are alike, yet all bear resemblances to one another” (p.2). It is important to take into account that there is great variation in terms of what different individuals can handle before they feel threatened (Koren, 2000). I will return to this later.

Anger. The anger expressed by the victims is not only directed against leaders, but also society in general. This has been described especially in the book *No escape male rape in US*

Prisons (Mariner, 2001). The victims are described as reacting with rage against both the violator, then against the prison administration which was unable to protect them, then against society in general (p.118). In my material, I generally found the second to be most relevant: rage against the leaders and the administration as a whole.

4. At risk – (lack of) support and isolation

However, I felt there and then that I wanted support at once, not after five days.

(One of the teachers in my group)

Social support is defined as information leading the subject to believe that he or she is cared for, loved, esteemed, and a member of a network of a mutual obligations (Cobb, 1976, p. 300). Support from colleagues and administration has proved to be important. Elklit (1993) states that the victim's ordinary network normally is not qualified or trained at providing support needed by the victims. The authors state that "Colleagues and work place are better suited at giving unconditional support after an incident of violence, than family and friends (p.152).

'It was ok when you were there, because you did not do anything.' The important thing is not what you do, but that you are present and thereby reducing the experience of loneliness amidst difficulties (Bjørklund, 1997, p. 54). Peer support and support from supervisors have been viewed as important factors in relieving the effects of stress (Levenson et al. cited in Berg, 2005). In this case it is about police officers, but should be relevant to teachers. Social support both in the work situation and outside has proved to be relevant (Boyle cited in Lundström, 2006). To be standing alone is what is pointed out as the most stressful of all. The author stresses the importance of debriefing, where information from the victim could be given and thus handed over to superiors and colleagues (Lundström, 2006).

While my own data and the literature I have read mainly focus on lack of support, especially from administration, a Norwegian survey reveals that 57 % of teachers subjected to violence (n=540) received some kind of support, and of these 87 % were satisfied with it. When asked who provided support, 52 % said the administration, 6 % reported the union representative and 81 % colleagues (Utdanningsforbundet, 2005, p. 17).

These numbers are in contrast with the information received from my 14 informants, and also from an article on schools in Northern Norway, where teachers missed support from the administration after they had been exposed to violence (Johnsen, 2007). Playing down the problems of the employees is rather common among leaders, according to employees calling a hotline number called “Working life telephone” (Tangen, 2004). Very few of the victims experienced that they had received the needed support from the management. They often describe how their leaders showed an appearance of awkward embarrassment when dealing with the incident and soon a wall of silence arose (Breakwell & Skumsnes, 1995).

Understanding from your own network is limited, and many exposed to violent acts and threats choose not to mention what has happened to them. Other victims will experience impatience from their colleagues in the work environment when talking about it (Dyregrov cited in Moen, 2003, p. 162). One of my informants had been advised by his doctor to talk about the incident to his colleagues. So he did, and this was used as an excuse by his union representative for not discussing the lack of support of the management at a higher level. This writer himself heard the representative state: “I refuse to discuss it with the leadership since you have been talking about it to each and every one of the teaching staff...” This was said in what I interpreted to be a tone of contempt, in accordance to how others perceive victims of violence according to Dyregrov (cited in Moen, 2003) and Breakwell and Skumsnes (1995).

From a colleague’s point of view, it is difficult to find acceptable words. Dyregrov states that “it is important to remember that it is not the words which are important, but showing that one cares” (cited in Moen, 2003, p. 174) showing that you are concerned about the wellbeing of your work colleague. One of my informants demonstrates this by stating that what was most important to her just after the incident was that one colleague came over to her and offered her a cup of coffee, and then actually made it for her.

In Baltimore (The Baltimore Examiner Newspaper, 2007), teachers told the newspaper that high ranking administrators discourage teachers from filing reports in order to protect the school’s reputation. One reader in Philadelphia states that “principals and administration desired to keep the statistics low, fearing questioning of their leadership. Why should we have to go through this lack of support, fear and intimidation for the sake of statistics?” (Mims, 2007)

5. Victim blaming and the secondary victimizing

Victim precipitated conduct. Some of my informants were subjected to an indirect accusation that they themselves had provoked the violent act. Lindgren, Petterson and Hägglund (2001) discuss this matter in their book; *Brottsoffer: från teori till praktik (Victims of violence: From theory to practice)* in terms of how people must be understood and met on the basis that they have different needs to be taken care of. Some of those needs might be described as knowing the world is safe, predictable and that people can be trusted. Experiencing violence might destroy this illusion and result in a lack of trust in the world they live in.

In the same book (2001) the authors examine why and how the environment blames the victim. It is described as a process in which those who are not exposed to violence, blame the victim by the victim's way of behaving and attitudes. This explains why the victim has been exposed, and the world in which we live might continue to be safe, good and predictable for those in the collegium (Lindgren et al., 2001, p. 125). In our society, the term 'victim precipitated', can be explained as 'they asked for it' (Walklate, 2005).

Referring to Rowett's data (Rowett in Breakwell & Skumsnes, 1995) social workers who had been attacked by clients were estimated as more provoking, more incompetent, more authoritarian and less experienced. It was generally considered that they themselves sought out situations of risk, and challenged and confronted their clients unnecessarily. What is interesting is that also victims of violence supported these conceptions. This is in contrast to the fact that all victims strongly argued that they themselves never had full responsibility for the episodes they had been involved with.

Breakwell and Skumsnes (1995) state that the typical reaction when you have been exposed to risk is fear, then surprise and then anger. Soon after follows guilt. The feeling of guilt disturbs one's belief in oneself, and work can become a nightmare.

How can this victim blaming be explained? If the victim is to blame, violence is not a coincidence, and the world can still be safe, since if you yourself act adequately, nothing evil of that sort will happen to you.

Aggravation. The victim will often feel very angry with the person who committed the act. However, this anger might be directed to other people, for instance the employer (Lindgren et al., 2001). This gives me more understanding of the anger I met among my interviewees. A majority of them were angry with their leaders. This is in accordance with utterances from some of my informants. One of them says: “The worst part was not the threats. The worst part was not receiving any assistance or help (...) I am not bitter at the pupil, but by God so angry I am with those ‘up there’” (the administration). Another informant states several times during the interview he has a lack of trust in the administration and their lack of support of him. He describes his former school as a “hotel of madness” and says that he did not feel he could continue working under such leadership.

Both of these informants were able to express words that are attached to feelings of anxiety. Svensson (2006) discusses the real risk of being exposed to violence. After an incident, the exposed person has a fundamental need to be met with respect, and give and obtain information. When this does not occur, they experience a secondary victimizing. This involves not being met, not being received, not being respected, not being believed, not being heard. The concept secondary victimization, was coined in the book *Victims in the criminal justice system* more than two decades ago (Shapland, 1985).

One of my informants is very clear about this when she explained the way she was treated.

The worst about that incident (where a pupil had threatened her) was to be met by the administration with such little degree of respect. They did not believe me! In addition, I was not taken care of. That was the worst: those are the memories which still remain with me. If you can call them memories...

Then she goes on to describe how she went to one person in the administration, then was sent on to another person, whom she states “did not believe me” and who “got tired of me”. Then went back to the first person who she explains, “started laughing” when I asked to change classes after a traumatic episode (the teacher repeats, “started laughing” two times). Her reaction to this treatment and lack of respect, she describes as: “then I was so desperate that I

started crying. I just ran out (from her office) and started crying. But then I started thinking; NO! NO! NO!”

My informant goes on to describe how she was again sent on from this first person “Because she would not treat me with respect. She was incapable of taking me seriously.” Then she was sent to a third person in the administration (who at a later stage gave her valuable support, but only after himself having seen the pupil in action). This person sent her on to two experts from a counselling service. In addition, also here she was not received in the way she had a need for, in stating that the two counsellors “were just rolling their eyes at me. Yes, they were just rolling their eyes. Do you think it strange that I did not want anything more to do with the counsellors?” This is in accordance with the account from many victims of violence, who state that the great infringement is not the violent act or threats, but what follows (Svensson, 2006).

The risk of experiencing loneliness

Many state that they experience loneliness (Svensson, 2006). That does not mean that they do not have a social network, but that they do not wish to put a strain on their closest family and friends (p. 131). This is explained due to not wanting to expose their weakness to the existing network, and Svensson (2006, p. 130) states that it might even prove to be a correct strategy in order to remain strong, by not putting their weakness on display.

The feeling of loneliness is described in an article by Johnsen (2007), even if some violated teachers expressed limited degrees of support. The feeling of loneliness arises out of the fact that the victim does not (want to) talk about it. In Norway’s most populous school district, safety deputy Knut Myhrer declared: “Many regard it as a personal defeat and do not wish to tell anyone about it” (Krohn, 1999).

The risk of not being believed

Who can define what is an act of violence? As shown in the above interview abstracts from one of my informants, it becomes rather obvious that the teacher involved and the administration and experts, counsellors, have a deviant view as to whether my interviewee has been subject to a serious act of violence or not. In the book *Forstå og forebyg vold* (Understanding and preventing violence), (Popp & Munch-Hansen, 2005) the authors state

that it is the experience of the employee as to whether he/she has been violated which defines if it may be categorised as violence.

6. Interpretation of violent acts against professionals.

Feelings and uniqueness. How teachers experience violence from students.

AT RISK – FEELINGS

Feelings have often been seen as something un-academic. The article *Feeling at work* states:

Current concepts of feeling reflect a powerful tradition of Western culture that diminishes feeling in favor of reason. . In all but a few domains, emotion is regarded as the enemy of reason, as something to be managed and overcome. We have subordinated emotion to reason so completely and for so long (Sandelands & Boudens, 2000, p. 47).

“People are their emotions”, states Denzin (1984, p. 1). He goes on to state that “emotions are embodied experiences” (p. 30). All experience is situated. Situations envelop, enclose and capture individuals (Denzin, 1984). Emotionality and self are at the core of violence (Denzin, 1984, p. 169). Mykletun (2002) discusses the special relationship between a student and a teacher. They are stuck with each other. The student is obliged to come to class, and the teacher to teach him, even though he has threatened him and the situation in the classroom seems to put the teacher at risk. This relationship is underestimated and not focused on sufficiently both in Norwegian and international research and in the scientific literature.

To be struck by an act of violence by people you are employed to help, will easily be looked upon as unfair. And you will feel helpless (Nussle cited in Krøvel, Rund, & Rør, 2006, p. 227). In the book *Skam (Shame)*, that special feeling which is a natural feeling derived from exposure to violent incidents, is described as:

Shame is the experience of your own unworthiness. The vicious circle of shame is that it is shameful to display the shame, the shame of shame. A person who experiences

anxiety or sorrow, may receive concern and thoughtful consideration. The shameful person expects contempt. That is the double burden of deep shame. (Wyller, 2001)

A Swedish social worker has properly distinguished between “victim of” and “exposed to” violence by stating: A victim lies down on the ground and has got no power. An exposed person (to a violent act) still has control (Svensson, 2006, p. 113). Also Walklate (2005) dwells on the concept victim and ties it to powerlessness. Many teachers fear being exposed to colleagues and displaying themselves as incompetent, both to themselves and to others around (Hargreaves, 1996).

Most adults have worked hard to experience control, safety and security. Being exposed to violent acts takes away this illusion or feeling of control (Koren, 2000). In the midst of feelings of guilt, there is a disappointment in oneself, of having failed according to a personal ideal, a standard (Hargreaves, 1996). Most professionals have worked hard to obtain a feeling of control and a feeling of mastering their job. Being exposed to violence brings into being an impression of not having been able to maintain this control (Koren, 2000). In my material, this became evident when a teacher said he could produce a paper within twenty-four hours, which a thousand parents would sign to confirm that he had done a good job teaching their son or daughter. Another informant stated she started contemplating whether to take a complete different type of job.

In Lundström’s data (2006), 57 % of his informants described that they had experienced anger. Even more described their reaction as feelings of impotence (61 %) and feeling inadequate (77 %). Lazarus explains the individual reaction of persons to stress when they are exposed to risk their experiences with violence and the follow up afterwards (Lazarus, Folkman, & Visby, 2006). However, my informants continued working as teachers at other schools.

It is hard to predict how much stress an individual is able to handle. My department head in college told me that her father’s cousin had dragging our former Prime Minister Bratteli out from under a heap of dead bodies at a Nazi concentration camp in 1945. At that time, he had been the stronger one, Bratteli the weaker one. Later, the roles changed, and our former Prime

Minister's helper and saviour was never able to lead a satisfactory life due to his wartime experiences, while prime minister Bratteli prospered.

One of my informants was rather shaken after her incident with a violent boy. Then her superior stated that she has always been frail. Little did he know of what other experiences she had had which she carried along into that specific situation. Lazarus illustrates what I find very fitting in terms of the differences in how people may handle a specific situation in comparing people with iron. Even though both cast iron and steel are iron, the latter may withstand great pressure, while the former cracks easily (Lazarus et al., 2006). He goes on to explain that it is the individual's construction and the meaning of that incident that will decide which stress reactions it will provoke.

To me, it gave meaning when Lazarus in his book shares research by the two psychiatrists Grinker and Spiegel who in 1945 published their work *Men under Stress* on the stress of pilots during war-time operations. When the crew were facing danger and possible loss of life, they experienced a mixture of anger and fear, and when that threat is no longer there, this leads to aggressive activity combined with anger (Grinker & Spiegel cited in Lazarus et al., 2006). The author is occupied with how we traditionally have perceived feelings and stress as opposed to reason. He argues that feelings must be taken seriously and argues that feelings are a complex system of thoughts, motives and personal experiences which derive from our fight for survival (Lazarus et al., 2006, p. 126).

To some, the un-reflected fear of similar episodes happening again, will possibly lead to a continuous situation of stress and end with them being unable to continue working (Pedersen, 2002). This is also the case listed at the very beginning of this paper where the mathematic teacher first took sick leave, then changed to another type of work. In my own data, three of my informants quit their jobs shortly after the violent incidents, linking this to their experiences with violence and the follow up afterwards. However, my informants did continue working as teachers at other schools.

7. Conclusion.

There are few studies of teachers exposed to violence, even though much attention has been given to the topic in the media. Further research and a mapping by interviews and

questionnaires ought to be carried out to record the situation for teachers in Norway (and other countries as well). It is still a taboo to talk about being victimized by pupils. Culture maintains its taboos by showing contempt. Contempt leads to shame. Few will risk exposing such feelings, and therefore the norm of not making what is not seen, visible will continue if we do not give it more attention and perform extensive research.

At a major conference in Stavanger, on ‘Taking fear out of schools’, it was stated that “researchers are often preoccupied with the details of their research, and are simply unaware of the pressure on teachers” (Munthe, 2005). None of the more than 20 papers were about the teachers’ situation. It is time that extensive research is carried out in order to go deep into the matter of how teachers survive and suffer when put at risk in their work with children and youth.

As I have tried to demonstrate in this paper, teachers are at risk when performing their work. The main risk is not the act of violence itself, but the risk of losing their professional basic trust, of not experiencing support, of being blamed for the incident, and receiving a major blow to the feeling of control, both in themselves and in the institution where they work and by perceiving society generally as a dangerous and risky place to live. Losing one’s basic trust is the greatest risk from the incidents discussed above.

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