

SECTORAL ACTIVITIES PROGRAMME

SECTOR Notes

Violence and stress in education workplaces

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The education environment

Teachers, the largest job category in the education sector, bear the brunt of violence and stress affecting employees. Along with school directors, teachers are also those with the most interaction with internal (students) and external (mostly parents) users of the service. The intensive interactions between school heads, teachers and students over learning methods and outcomes, and pupil indiscipline that is often due to external factors, create tensions that are sources of violence, particularly at secondary levels. The isolation of teachers, alone in most classrooms, plays a role. Teachers may also be perpetrators of violence against students. Moreover, harassment and bullying among students themselves at virtually all levels of education, and external factors such as drugs, poverty and ethnic, racial or religious conflict, create a climate of violence which may have repercussions on staff. Occasional violence arises from firearms used against students and staff either by disaffected students or persons external to an education site, who gain entrance to what is often an unprotected workplace.

Stress affecting education staff arises from many of the same work environment sources: the intensive interpersonal relations which condition educational work; deep-seated changes in the content and modes of delivery of educational services; lack of autonomy, and demands for accountability about academic performance from educational users – students, parents and political leaders.

Scope and impact of violence and stress

Trends in violence within education are not uniform. Some countries (for instance the United States) appear to show a decline in recent years, despite some dramatic instances of firearms-related violence. In other countries and regions, acts of violence appear to be on the

upswing. Some OECD countries report 15 to 20 per cent of students in different age categories as the objects of some form of violence in schools, and the figure may be higher in some cases of violence in other countries (sexual violence against girls in South Africa for example). Bullying among students ranges from 4 to 15 per cent in most OECD countries that provide such statistics. The number of teachers targeted by violence is generally lower, in the range of 2 to 6 per cent in several countries (Japan, France, the United States). These figures also vary according to urban, suburban or rural settings, and according to the type of violence – higher in the case of threats than actual acts of violence.

The effects of violence are felt essentially in the teaching and learning environment, which may become poisoned, with educational outcomes reduced. Fear and apprehension affect students and teachers alike. However, staff targeted by violent acts tend to have higher rates of absenteeism, may be obliged to stop work, and make claims on educational employers for medical treatment and social assistance, all of which directly impact on operating costs. They may also request reclassification or early retirement, thereby provoking loss of skilled professional labour, with negative implications for student learning.

Workplace stress in education also principally affects teachers and school heads. Somewhat differently from violence, stress levels are related more to individual fears and anxieties (feelings of inadequacy or lack of training for tasks), internal work organization factors and the physical environment (excessive working requirements and hours, improper organization of tasks, pupil indiscipline and inadequate administrative support or communication), lack of autonomy and high levels of accountability for results, combined with constant changes or reforms. Although the subject is widely discussed, reliable statistics are difficult to come by. Mid-1990s estimates researched for the ILO nevertheless suggest that between 25 and 33 per cent of teachers in most OECD countries experience high levels of work-related stress. New entrants to teaching appear to be more at risk than others. The consequences take the form of more anxiety and depression among teachers, increased physical ailments provoked by high levels of negative stress, and increased drug and alcohol consumption. Highly stressed teachers may feel overwhelmed by their tasks, and withdrawn from students and their work. Absenteeism rates increase, particularly as stress turns into burnout; in extreme cases, stress may lead to suicide. The negative impact on teaching and learning outcomes can be quite severe, and in any case counterproductive for dynamic

working and learning environments, as schools face increasing challenges in knowledge-based societies.

Risk assessment, prevention, reduction, management and coping measures

Preventing, reducing, managing and coping with violence and/or stress in education depend on the nature of the problem, but generally imply involvement of a range of actors and response levels. School and higher-level management, teachers' union representatives, medical and insurance staff, but also affected individuals all have roles in addressing violence, stress or both. At the individual level, solutions to violence and stress emphasize training to recognize potential problems and symptoms, counselling and support for victims and sufferers, and transfers to other less stressful or violent environments. Initiatives to promote school or organizational healthiness – the soundness of organizational coherence and its integration of objectives, tasks, problem-solving skills and development efforts – can moderate teacher stress levels, and reduce the negative impact on their health and work behaviour. Organizational interventions to help manage stress in education include redesigning work, ergonomics, teacher training and counselling to assist teachers in coping, and organization of school teams to help restore organizational healthiness.

In addition, special measures to prevent violence include developing safe schools policies and programmes, redesigning school access (screening for weapons, installing gates and cameras, and adopting extra security measures), a safer physical environment (improved lighting, changing the layout to reduce isolation), redesigned work (team teaching, open parent/teacher meetings), establishing crisis management teams, and interpersonal violence prevention training for students and staff.