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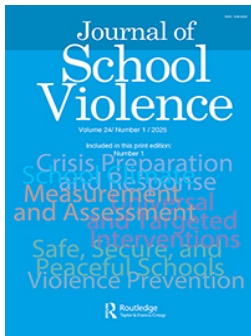
Australian Teachers' Perceptions of Safety, Violence and Limited Support in Their Workplaces

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Australian Teachers' Perceptions of Safety, Violence and Limited Support in Their Workplaces

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ABSTRACT

In the context of teaching workforce shortages, this study examined teachers' perceptions of safety, role satisfaction, and their intent to remain in the profession, in Australia. Findings from two iterations of a survey of a total of 8293 teachers revealed that 20% to 25% of participants felt unsafe in their schools. The results also showed that those who felt unsafe were less likely to be satisfied with the role and more likely to intend to leave the profession. Sources of safety concerns included student and parent behaviors along with a lack of support from schools and systems. The findings highlight an urgent need to better understand how schools and education systems might foster safer, more inclusive and positive learning environments.

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Teacher safety; teacher attrition; student behavior; parent behavior; teacher-directed violence

Introduction

Teaching work is seen to be complex and challenging as well as rewarding. Teachers navigate numerous relationships with students, parents, colleagues, leaders and other stakeholders as well as the social, political and economic contexts of their communities. Research has shown that people predominantly choose teaching as a career for moral and social reasons, such as a desire to make a difference for children and young people (Watt et al., 2017). The world is currently faced with a teacher shortage, and attrition from the profession is a pressing issue (Craig, 2017; Longmuir et al., 2022). With large numbers of teachers seemingly walking away from a profession that they had entered with commitment and passion, understanding their reasons has implications for both stemming attrition and attracting future teachers. Recent research has shown that workload and disrespect for the profession are often cited as some of the main reasons for teachers wanting to leave the profession (Gavin et al., 2022; Heffernan et al., 2022). However, another commonly cited contribution to teacher burnout and dissatisfaction with their work is teachers' sense of safety in the workplace (S. S. Braun et al., 2022; Fogelgarn et al., 2019; Moon et al., 2021).

Safety concerns in Australian schools are more prevalent than in other high-income countries. For example, in 2018 Australian principals were four times more likely to report that students intimidated or physically abused teachers or staff at least weekly than their counterparts in other OECD countries (Thomson & Hillman, 2019). Primary and secondary teachers also reported that such intimidation and abuse was a source of stress, although at a similar rate than colleagues from OECD countries – 13% and 14% for Australia and OECD countries, respectively (Thomson & Hillman, 2020).

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Issues of safety in education settings have evolved over time. There are increasingly complex demands on schools with heightened expectations for outcomes in terms of students' achievement, wellbeing and their preparation for uncertain futures. Within many modern communities, diversity, inequity, technology and social volatility make delivering education arguably more complex and challenging than ever before (Gu & Day, 2011). While legislation and policy settings have aimed to minimize risks of harm that might arise from environmental or accidental circumstances, incidents of interpersonal harm, both physical and mental, are widely reported as occurring in school settings in countries across the globe (Benbenishty & Astor, 2011). At their extreme, violent incidents in schools include the devastating school shootings common in the USA which have claimed the lives of almost 300 people since 2010 (Gun Violence Archive, 2023). Aside from this dramatic example of gun-based violence, issues related to aggression, abuse and violence occur in schools regularly, and have an impact on teachers' capacity to work and sustain themselves in their profession (Moon et al., 2021; Peist et al., 2020). The short- and long-term impacts of unsafe working conditions for teachers also have detrimental impacts on the learning experiences of children and young people (S. S. Braun et al., 2022).

In Australia, where the research informing this paper was undertaken, there is heightened concern for the sustainability and effectiveness of the teaching workforce (Australian Government - Department of Education, 2022). Teacher shortages are regularly reported with many schools finding it challenging to provide enough teachers to cover classes (Longmuir, 2023). There is a sense that the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated teaching workforce issues. The *Teachers' Perceptions of their Work* research program that informs this paper includes two surveys of the Australian teaching workforce. The first was conducted in 2019 with 2796 participants and the second in 2022 with 5497 participants. This research provides evidence of a possible increase in the number of teachers considering leaving the profession after the pandemic, from 58% of respondents in 2019 to 72% of respondents in 2022 (Longmuir et al., 2022). The reasons participants gave to explain their intention to leave teaching were related to workload, the changing nature of the profession, and the impacts of their work on their health and wellbeing (Longmuir et al., 2022). Contributing to these concerns were issues related to safety in the workplace. In the 2022 survey, almost 25% of participants reported that they did not feel safe in their schools. They were concerned with their own safety, but also that of their colleagues and their students. These insights from our initial work with the survey data prompted us to consider two broader questions:

Q1 - How are teachers perceiving their safety in school settings?

Q2 - How do perceptions of safety relate to reported satisfaction and potential retention in the profession?

These are important questions for a conversation about teachers' workplace safety and ones that we argue have not received significant attention in research and policy. Although we acknowledge that our study is limited in terms of informing a definitive answer to these questions, we seek to contribute to this important conversation in ways that make visible the complexities of school-based violence and its influence on teachers work. With this in mind, in this paper we draw on a secondary interrogation of the data from our research and connect with other research that indicates that safety in schools is a pressing issue. We contend that issues of violence, aggression and intimidation in school settings reflect complex social conditions, and that responses need to move beyond a focus on individuals and traditional notions of "discipline" to broader thinking about the ways that education is able to respond to changing social conditions.

Safety in schools

While schools are one of the most likely places children and young people may experience violence, it is widely accepted that school violence reflects broader social and community issues (Sela-Shayovitz, 2009). Traditionally, school safety measures have focused on security and reducing the incidence of physical harm to students and educators. More recently, however, notions of "safety" have expanded

to include conceptualizations of wellbeing, so that students and educators ideally feel physically, emotionally and mentally safe, and secure and comfortable within school environments. This has been driven by a range of social and educational factors, including an increasingly nuanced understanding of psychology that has determined that learning and other cognitive functions are dependent on the fulfillment of lower order needs, such as a sense of safety and connection (e.g. Maslow, 1943). There have also been broader social and legal trends to reduce risk of avoidable harms through occupational health and safety legislation and policy.

Modern schooling practices, shaped by wider social and economic conditions that favor competition and individual acquisition lead to significant numbers of students damaged by their engagement with schools (Longmuir et al., 2022; Smyth & McInerney, 2012). Power differentials that underpin the organization of schooling are held in place by complex historical, social and economic forces that impact students significantly. Historically, a key organizing feature of schools has been the control of students often via threatened and actual physical assault and, while corporal measures are now less common, symbolic, cultural, psychosocial and economic harms are experienced by many students.

While the focus of this paper is on teachers' safety, the arguments presented here do not intend to neglect the importance of students' safety as a note-worthy research issue. In discussing issues of teachers' safety in this paper, we are both aware of, and challenged by, the tension between teachers' safety and students' safety. It is our hope this work adds strength to the argument that schools can be unsafe environments for all involved and that improving safety for teachers does not need to come at the cost of improved safety for students. In fact, we suggest, that the two are deeply intertwined and that one cannot be considered irrespective of the other.

Teacher-directed violence

Despite developments that aim to provide safe and secure teaching and learning environments in modern schools, issues of violence and abuse continue to impact both teachers and students. Although it is possible for any member of a school community to be the target of violent or abusive behaviors, and as noted above, we acknowledge that students are commonly victims of a range of violence experienced in schools (often predicated on their subjection to the power held by adults as they seek to control children and young people) incidences of unsafe interpersonal behaviors specifically directed at teachers are of primary interest in this study, and we suggest that safety for teachers is a both a condition of and a facilitator for, safer schools for students. Teacher-directed violence has been defined as “forms of physical violence, such as assault and weapon use, and nonphysical violence, such as threats and verbal abuse” (Peist et al., 2020, p. 554). Research from Australia found that educators have higher official claim rates for assault-related injuries and mental health injuries than those from other professions (Al Afreed et al., 2022). Further, Al Afreed et al. (2022) suggested that such injuries were under-reported in the teaching profession. The authors noted that “violence is evidenced to have an immense impact on educators' quality of life and overall wellbeing, including increased risk of cardiovascular disease and sleep disorders, decreased sense of safety, and poor mental and emotional wellbeing” (Al Afreed et al., 2022, pp. 6–7). However, issues of violence pertaining to teachers have rarely been the focus of research despite their high personal and public toll (Berkowitz et al., 2022; Montgomery, 2019). Research in the USA determined that “perceived threats and/or actual experience of violence in school systems” had received “surprisingly limited attention” despite the impact on recruitment and retention of teachers (Espelage et al., 2013, p. 75). Further, a cross-national study of the impact of school violence on teachers' professionalism concurred that while research into the impact on students was available, there was very limited examination of “how school violence impacts teachers' wellbeing, job satisfaction, and future career decisions” (Y. Yang et al., 2021, p. 1).

Available research has indicated that violence directed toward teachers is rising to concerning levels. For example, a national survey conducted in the USA by the American Psychological Association found that 94% of surveyed teachers had been victimized and 44% had been physically attacked (McMahon et al., 2014). The authors concluded that “physical and verbal violence against

educators may be exacerbating reports of high stress, transfers and leaving the profession” (p. 1). In Canada, 70% of surveyed teachers reported an increase in the rate and severity of violence in schools and, in some provinces, 90% of teachers reported experiencing violence (Montgomery, 2019). In other countries, teacher-directed violence is similarly reported at concerning levels. For example, 47% of teachers surveyed in the United Kingdom reported experiencing aggressive or violent behavior from students at least once a month (Kirk, 2022), and 58% of surveyed teachers in Brazil reported violent victimization (Ceballos & Carvalho, 2021).

In Australia, there has been some recent research and policy interest in issues of teacher safety. Billett et al. (2019) researched teacher-targeted bullying and harassment which they define as:

a communication process that involves a real or perceived power imbalance where a teacher is subjected, by one or more students or their parents, to interaction that he or she perceives as insulting, upsetting, or intimidating (Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2012) which may be verbal, nonverbal, or physical in nature; a single or recurring instance; and of short or long duration (p. 176)

They found that 80% of Australian teachers had experienced bullying or harassment from a student or parent within a 12-month period (Fogelgarn et al., 2019). In a study of Western Australian teachers, Lowe et al. (2020) found that 68% of respondents had experienced teacher-directed violence at least once in the 2-year prior to the study. A significant Australian project that has been conducted annually since 2011 is the *Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey* (See et al., 2022). The most recent iteration found that 49% of school leaders have experienced threats of violence, 44% had an experience of physical violence, and the percentages of principals reporting such violence had almost doubled since 2011 (See et al., 2022). The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) sought to address the issue through the development of a national strategy that aimed to “ensure the occupational health, safety, and wellbeing of the profession” through five priority areas: 1) Building the evidence base; 2) a focus on mental health and prevention through an inclusive wellbeing lens; 3) strengthening school communities; 4) raising the status of the profession; and, 5) acknowledging the need for innovation in environments of growing complexity (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2020, p. 6). In specific attention to school safety, the strategy document suggests that “when behaviour destructive to wellbeing occurs [and] in the case of serious threats to wellbeing, legal and regulatory frameworks are appropriately utilised” (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2020, p. 17). This demonstrates a tendency for policy to default to the fundamental place of regulatory frameworks and occupational health and safety perspectives when responding to challenges to safety in schools.

Rights and legalities

Issues of human rights and their representation in legal and regulatory frameworks have been foundational in discussions of safety. Embedded in the historical and social conditions of power differentials in schooling as discussed above, conflict in education settings can arise from tensions between the rights of different stakeholders (including students, parents and educators), and this is often central to issues of safety in school contexts where both the physical and psychosocial safety of a teacher may be compromised to ensure the safety and/or wellbeing of a student, or group of students. It is beyond the scope or capacity of this paper to do a thorough examination of the relationship between legal settings and teacher safety, but this overview attempts to draw attention to some of the foundational tensions reported in the literature from a rights and legalities perspective. We suggest that this focus illuminates a complexity that should be attended to in any efforts to respond to issues of violence in schools. By highlighting the complexity, we seek to counter simplistic solutions based in either blame for certain students, or groups of students, or expectations that teachers forego their rights in order to do their jobs.

Gillett-Swan and Lundy (2021, p. 95) contend that “schools present a unique context for the generation and resolution of conflicts of human rights.” The rights that most often come into conflict

when teacher safety is threatened relate to safe work environments for teachers and the right to education for children and young people. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 23 describes the right to “just and favourable conditions of work” (United Nations, 1948), and legislative moves to protect the occupational health and safety of workers are evident in most modern nation states. The most relevant protection of children’s rights to education is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989), which is the most widely ratified human rights treaty ever developed (Winter & De Bruin, 2021). However, research has suggested that enacting this right is complex due to the unusual circumstance with children who are legally minors being the rights holder. Not only do children have their own rights but they are also subject to the rights of their parents or caregivers. Gillett-Swan and Lundy (2021, p. 95) suggest that “this mix of diverse individual rights and interests provides a cocktail of potential rights claims and conflicts, involving a diverse array of actors.” One stark example of conflict in the rights of children to education, the rights of parents to schooling, and the rights of teachers to health and safety was evident as the world grappled with decisions to close and/or re-open schools during the COVID-19 pandemic (Maguire & McNamara, 2020).

A further complication in considering tensions between the rights of teachers and the rights of students (and by proxy, their parents) is the multifaceted role of the teacher in the relationship. Teachers are both a right holder in terms of their right to safe working environments, but also a duty bearer in terms of their obligations to fulfil the rights of children to an education (Gillett-Swan & Lundy, 2021). A further layer to this complexity is the intersections of rights where multiple children may have different educational and safety needs within one classroom that need to be attended to by a teacher. With increasingly diverse and complex student needs often present in modern classrooms, teachers are working under arrangements that can easily manifest as conflicts at the level of human rights. Many scholars engage with this issue and suggest that there are more relational, inclusive, humane and civil possibilities that would better protect the rights of teachers, students, and parents as they come together in schooling environments (see for example: Smyth et al., 2014; Sullivan et al., 2016; Winter & De Bruin, 2021). Such legal and rights-based framings of teacher safety need to be considered in conjunction with an acknowledgment of the social, economic and political conditions of modern, rapidly changing environments. In the following section, we reflect on the prevalence of social volatility and the impact on education.

Social volatility

As well as acknowledging the historically situated constructions of schools based on power differentials between adults and children, that, as discussed, have commonly resulted in harms for students, any current manifestations of safety issues within schools cannot be detached from the broader social circumstances of the current times. There are many indicators that schools navigate increasingly divisive and volatile social conditions. Over recent decades, schools have been subjected to “the neoliberal project [which has seen] the marketize, standards-based, accountability-driven phase . . . to quasi-privatise schools” resulting in individualized, competitive and often anxiety producing goals for education (Smyth & McInerney, 2012, p.9). Further, many argue that social turbulence based on rationalities of fear, uncertainty, individualization, polarization, as well as the erosion of democratic institutions (see, for example, Bauman, 2007; Riddle, 2022) have been exacerbated by the global pandemic. Within these broader contexts, relational tensions experienced in schools interact with issues such as record levels of mental ill-health (Liang et al., 2020; Waters et al., 2021), increasing economic stress for families (Biddle & Gray, 2023; Xiao et al., 2023), and teacher shortages (Department of Education, 2022; Longmuir et al., 2022), creating conditions that are resulting in reduced stability and safety in school settings.

Research has shown that interconnections between school and classroom climate, individual student needs, family circumstances, and the broader social climate are all implicated in the likelihood of antisocial, aggressive and even violent outcomes for children and young people (Jimerson et al.,

2012). Within the broader social environments characterized by this uncertainty, volatility and mistrust, schools are attempting to respond with techniques that are framed by the prevailing discourses of marketization of education, in their efforts to manage unprecedented sources of disruption. This disjuncture contributes to the challenges to the safety of those who work and learn in these environments.

Method

For the purpose of garnering insights into teachers’ attitudes and behaviors, we selected a survey research approach which enabled us to sample from the Australian teaching population (Creswell, 2019). We designed an online questionnaire that included both quantitative items (Likert-like responses) and qualitative items where participants were asked to provide more detailed responses on topics through open-ended comments. This paper draws on data from a selection of items relevant to the focus of this paper from two iterations (2019 and 2022) of this questionnaire (see Appendix A).

The anonymous questionnaire sought to understand teachers’ perceptions of their own working conditions, their satisfaction with their role, and their feelings about how teachers are perceived in Australia. These two data collection activities were undertaken as a part of the broader research project: Perceptions of Teachers and Teaching in Australia (see Longmuir et al., 2022 for more information). The study received the appropriate ethical clearances from our university ethics committee (Human Research Ethics Committee Project ID #21106 and #32494).

Each questionnaire was advertised and disseminated through institutional and personal social media accounts. Recruitment of participants to the online questionnaire also relied on snowball sampling methods via the re-sharing of the information about the questionnaire primarily through social media. This resulted in a nonprobability sample of the Australian teacher population (Creswell, 2019). In 2019, 2796 teachers from across the country responded, and in 2022, 5497 responses to the survey were received. Of them, 2598 and 4991 respondents answered the question about safety in 2019 and 2022, respectively. Given the nature of the questionnaire distribution and the ethical requirements for participant anonymity, it is not possible to claim any consistency in the sample in terms of the same individuals responding to both surveys. Nor of course, would there be any way to connect responses of individuals who did respond to both surveys as no identifying information was collected. This is a limitation of this project as it is not possible to make direct comparisons over time. The results that are presented below are for the sample of teachers who completed the safety questions.

Table 1 shows teachers from across all states and territories of Australia responded for both iterations of the questionnaire. Although we do not claim that this is a representative sample, the proportion of the Australian population of teachers for 2021 is also included in Table 1 to indicate possible comparisons to the broader population.

The samples also included participants across other categories, as shown in Table 2. Participants represented a range of career stages (Oplatka & Tako, 2009) and Australian education settings and sectors.

Table 1. Samples and population proportions (%) of teachers in Australia by state and territory.

	2019 Sample	2022 Sample	2021 Teacher Population*
Victoria	34.4	43.3	26.7
New South Wales	24.6	21.4	29.9
Queensland	17.0	15.6	21.2
South Australia	14.7	5.0	6.7
Western Australia	3.5	8.8	10.4
Tasmania	2.8	2.3	2.1
Northern Territory	1.6	0.9	1.1
Australian Capital Territory	1.5	2.6	1.8

*2021 Teacher population data was the most recent available and sourced from Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2021, p. 25).

Table 2. Respondents' career phases and educational settings and sectors.

	2019 Sample	2022 Sample
	%	%
Career phase		
• Early career (0–5 years)	38.2	20.2
• Establishing career (6–10 years)	15.5	19.7
• Mid-career (11–19 years)	24.8	32.3
• Late career (20+ years)	21.5	27.8
Educational setting^a		
• Primary school (children approx. 4–12 years old)	52.2	50.7
• Secondary school (children approx. 12–18 years old)	46.5	44.8
• Other setting (including early childhood and higher education and other educational organizations)	6.4	9.2
Educational sector^a		
• Government/public/state	70.5	70.9
• Independent/private	15.9	19.3
• Faith-based schools	16.2	13.6
• Other	1.7	1.7

^aParticipants were able to select more than one setting or sector as some teaching roles cross several categories. Therefore, percentage totals may equal more than 100.

Data analysis

For this paper, data from each questionnaire iteration was analyzed with specific attention to the question “Do you feel safe at work?” Participants were able to respond “yes” or “no” to this item and if they selected “no” they were prompted to provide an open comment to specify why. Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted using R version 4.3.1. The analysis consists of frequency tables and chi-square tests for the relationship between perceptions of safety at work and satisfaction with their career and their intentions to remain in the profession.

Of the 1714 respondents who answered “no” (491 in 2019 and 1223 in 2022), 1639 (96%) (455 in 2019 and 1184 in 2022) provided an open comment to explain their “no” response. We sought to analyze these comments in ways that did not diminish the nuance and complexity of the rich qualitative comments provided. Our hybrid coding approach aimed to support a generative discussion within the broad themes that we noticed in the data (Swain, 2018). This enabled inductive and deductive analysis techniques to be used at different phases of the analysis. The first phases employed inductive thematic analysis (V. Braun & Clarke, 2013) to generate coding across the two separate datasets (2019 and 2022). This was initially completed separately for each dataset as a part of the original analysis. Examples of codes and themes employed for these two stages are presented in Table 3.

Then, in a second phase specifically for this paper, the original themes were compiled and compared across the responses from the 2 years. This informed the two higher-level themes of *Students and Parents* and *Support from schools, systems and policies* as presented below in the findings section. These choices were made in order to present our findings in ways that were most relevant to

Table 3. Themes and codes for independent data analysis of 2019 and 2022 data sets.

2019		2022	
Themes	Codes	Themes	Codes
• Physical health and safety	• Student violence	• Student behavior and violence	• Unpredictable and dangerous student behaviors
• Mental health and wellbeing	• Parent aggression	• Parent abuse	• Safety risks
	• Stress	• Negative relationships with other staff including leaders	• Parent threats
	• Work-life balance	• Mental health and wellbeing	• Lack of support
			• Stress/anxiety
			• Emotional safety

the purpose of this paper. On determining these higher-level themes, we sought to further interrogate the data through an inductive analysis phase using codes informed by our reading of the literature on teacher safety. Here we coded the subject of comments: students, parents, leaders, other staff, government (which includes system support and policy settings), personal (which included mental health and family), physical environment (building conditions, etc.) and, for the 2022 data, COVID. We wish to note here that COVID was mentioned in 104 comments in total, of which, 31 comments were only about COVID infection risks. The other 73 comments included other safety concerns or were about the impacts of the pandemic (such as increases in disruptive student behavior) on their safety. These data suggest that the experience of the pandemic has had an impact on teachers' perceptions of their safety in a range of ways, and that these impacts continue and have only increased the imperative to focus on teachers' safety and school violence. Due to the fact that our study did not seek to investigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic specifically and that we have limited relevant data to draw on, we note that this is a limitation of this study and a possible avenue for future research. Finally, we also coded the data according to the issues of safety that were mentioned: violence, assault and support.

In the findings section below, we first present quantitative analysis followed by a discussion of the qualitative themes. We note that the quantitative responses should be read with an understanding of the limitations of the instrument (as have been discussed). These quantitative results are shared not as independent, conclusive proof, but rather to illustrate that there is an issue with teacher safety in schools that merits further attention. Therefore, our analysis of the qualitative data as presented later in the findings section below, is important due to the attention to the voices of teachers that make this issue more visible and nuanced.

Findings

Safety at school

To consider Q1, we probed the data available from the Teachers' Perceptions of their Work survey that was directly related to issues of safety. The instrument asked participants to indicate their feelings of safety at school by way of a "yes" or "no" response to the question: "Do you feel safe at school?." [Table 4](#) shows that a concerning proportion of respondents did not feel safe in their workplace.

These results indicate that there was a greater proportion of teachers concerned about their safety in 2022 than in 2019 ($\chi^2_1 = 30.4, p - value < 0.001$). Although the limitations of the research do not make it possible to claim longitudinal trends, these indications, in concert with other Australian research, suggest threats to educators' sense of safety have increased in recent years (see, for example, [See et al., 2022](#)). It should be noted that in the years between the two iterations of our survey, conditions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant influence on teachers' work across Australia and concerns related to the communicably disease likely contributed to the increased "Yes" response to our safety question in 2022. Although this is an important observation about our data, it is widely felt that in fact the pandemic experience has increased the likelihood of unsafe school climates beyond infection concerns rendering our interest in issues of safety and violence more relevant. In order to further understand teachers' perceptions of safety in their schools we undertook a deeper analysis of the combined qualitative comments provided in 2019 and 2022. This analysis found that approximately two-thirds of those who did not feel safe at school cited issues of teacher-directed violence as a reason for their response.

Table 4. Survey response numbers and percentages of participants who feel unsafe at school.

	Total respondents	Percent of participants feeling unsafe at school
2019	2598	18.9
2022	4991	24.5

Table 5. Satisfaction with role compared to feelings of safety (percentage by feelings of safety).

	Satisfied with role			
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
2019				
Not feeling safe	10.6	49.7	37.1	2.6
Feeling safe	2.7	25.1	60.7	11.5
2022				
Not feeling safe	20.8	55.3	22.0	1.9
Feeling safe	6.7	40.3	47.5	5.5

Table 6. Intentions to leave compared to feelings of safety.

	Intending to leave or considering leaving	Not intending to leave
2019		
Not feeling safe	71.5	28.5
Feeling safe	54.7	45.3
2022		
Not feeling safe	82.3	17.7
Feeling safe	69.1	30.9

Satisfaction, intentions to leave and safety

Responses to the teacher safety item, along with items that asked about participants' satisfaction with their role and their intentions to leave the profession, were used to answer RQ2 (see [Appendix A](#) for more information). [Table 5](#) shows that for both years, respondents who reported feeling not safe at school were less likely to report feeling satisfied with their role ($\chi^2_3 = 211.7, p - \text{value} < 0.001$ in 2019 and $\chi^2_3 = 395.2, p - \text{value} < 0.001$ in 2022). In 2022, 23.9% of respondents who declared not feeling safe at school agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with their role. In contrast, 53% of teachers who declared feeling safe at school agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with their role. Similarly, in 2019, 39.7% of those who reported not feeling safe at school reported being satisfied with their job, in comparison with 72.2% of those who declared feeling safe at school.

[Table 6](#) shows that if respondents reported not feeling safe, they were more likely to report intending to leave the profession ($\chi^2_1 = 45.2, p - \text{value} < 0.001$ in 2019 and $\chi^2_1 = 79.1, p - \text{value} < 0.001$ in 2022). In 2022, only 17.7% of those reporting not feeling safe at school were intending to stay in the profession, in comparison to 30.9% of those who reported feeling safe. Similarly, in 2019, 28.5% of those feeling unsafe at school reported intending to stay in the profession, in comparison to 45.3% of those who did feel safe.

These data suggest concerning trends for teachers' working lives and their capacity to sustain themselves in their important careers. With growing alarm about the capacity of the teaching workforce to meet demand in Australian schools that these data suggest that feelings of safety at work are associated with diminished satisfaction and a higher intention to leave the profession are important and warrant further investigation. We turn now to the qualitative data collected through the questionnaire to present more detailed insight into these suggested trends.

Qualitative insights

To better understand the issues of safety that teachers are experiencing, we analyzed the open-ended comments provided by the participants who answered "no" to the question of feeling safe at school. Across the two survey iterations, there were 1639 comments which represented 21.5% of the total number of survey participants combined across the 2 years.

We note that our analysis did not seek to categorize, classify or segment the reasons provided in the responses in any comprehensive way. Rather, we sought to engage with the generous comments that participants provided in ways that honored the complexity of their contexts and

entanglements of their work and their perceptions of their safety and our coding approach reflected this. For example, many of the open comments provided were coded to several categories (see [Table 3](#)) as participants tended to talk about the range and interactions of different safety stressors that they had experienced and rather than assign priority to a specific code, we elected to represent the data across as many as were needed to capture the complexities. For example, a proportion of respondents commented on safety threats from students and parents as well as referring to the limited support either from their school leadership or from the broader system and policy settings. We note this survey was not designed to be a detailed instrument focused on understanding teachers' perceptions of safety. This analysis is taken from a single open comment invitation where participants were asked to explain why they did not feel safe in their workplaces. However, the resulting data are rich and detailed, and the analysis provides useful insights into the issues of teacher safety. In the findings below, we have provided some indications of proportions of respondents who commented on specific aspects and have purposefully used approximating language to acknowledge that the process of quantifying qualitative responses is restricted.

The use of participant quotes features in our presentation of the results of the thematic analysis below. The amplification of teachers' voices has been an aim of our research program (Longmuir et al., 2022), as we concur with other researchers that the experiences and perspectives of teachers are often not featured in discussions of issues that impact their work and lives (Eacott et al., 2022; Gavin et al., 2022). As well as attempting to position teachers' voices to have active agency through the presentation of our findings, we also contend that this is a rigorous qualitative method practice, where "the use of respondent quotes ... will ultimately illuminate the experiences and social worlds to which the qualitative researcher has been given temporary and privileged access" (Parkin & Kimergård, 2022, p. 112).

We present the findings from this analysis in two sections below. The first relates to student and parent behaviors, which were the most reported sources of safety concerns with almost three quarters of comments referring to them. The second theme relates to the broader ecologies of the schools where teachers reflected on the arrangements and processes that offered support for their safety.

Students and parents

Both students and parents were reported as a source of safety concerns in the comments of the largest proportion of responses. The participants described challenges related to the behavior and mental health of students. Participants also spoke of parents who were demanding, volatile and abusive. The responses included descriptions of incidents with students and parents that made them feel unsafe physically and/or psychologically.

Physical violence

Many comments described physically violent behaviors including assaults on teachers or other students, and weapons being brought to school. Descriptions of physically violent experiences predominantly involved students, whereas behaviors attributed to parents usually involved abuse, threats and intimidation. This school leader described the range of physically violent and abusive behaviors they had experienced:

I have been physically assaulted many times, including punched, kicked, slapped, bitten, pinched, and spat on (spat in my face from close range). I have had furniture and school equipment thrown at me. I once had rocks and bricks thrown at me. I have had death threats and threats of physical harm. Whenever I have to respond to a red behaviour card, I worry about what I will be walking into. I have had to take scissors, knives, and a thick metal chain off escalated students.

This quote illustrates a range of unsafe physical behaviors that school staff are exposed to. Across the data, evidence of students' physical action posing danger and harm to educators, and

other students was rife. Often these instances were couched in language of “dysregulation” and framed with descriptions of contexts that did not provide appropriate support for diverse student needs.

Abuse and intimidation

Verbal abuse from students and parents was also commonly mentioned as an experience that made teachers feel unsafe. Participants described threats, aggression and intimidation. These responses provide some illustrative examples:

I have been, shouted at, sworn at, verbally abused, ridiculed online, physically threatened and/or physically intimidated by some students and/or their parents.

Some students are aggressive, manipulative, and unpredictable with the support of their parents and seem to be in charge.

Students can be aggressive and regularly verbally abuse teachers. Parents verbally abuse and threaten staff regularly.

Teachers also described the threats that they are subjected to which included being reported to a higher authority or public commentary on their work being shared. This includes the potential that they are being video or audio recorded by students and parents as they go about their work and that this could be used against them, either on social media platforms, or more formally as part of a complaint. These are some examples of the many comments that alluded to this:

Parents abusing us, threatening us, spreading complaints, and gossiping about every little thing. It is as if they think they own us and our work.

Parents are verbally abusive, threaten to take staff to the department, constantly say they record you etc. also threaten physical violence.

The slightest thing instigates a professional investigation. Students word is taken over teachers. Students' behaviour is excused with little consequence.

These quotes suggest that teachers have limited control over damaging and abusive behaviors. Such experiences were often associated with capacity of students and parents to share and/or escalate their interpretations of incidents rapidly, thanks to immediate communication technologies, i.e. a parent online chat group, or an e-mail to a school leader or an education department representative. These avenues to escalate concerns have empowered parents and students and often mean that opportunities for more civil communication about concerns are bypassed.

These findings are of interest given the historical prevalence of students being subjected to the controlling powers of schooling arrangements and therefore teachers. The indication here is that this traditional power balance is being disrupted. It is important to remember here that these findings are solely from the perspective of teachers. So, although these data indicate unproductive and damaging new ways of relating between teachers, students and parents, it is not to say that a rebalancing of power differentials in other ways could not be productive.

State of alert

Some descriptions of the experiences were aware of the interplay of safety issues with students' mental health and their capacity to regulate their behaviors. Teachers explained the need to constantly reflect on how their actions and decisions might exacerbate mental distress for some students. They describe their concerns about how simple daily occurrences could ignite angry, aggressive responses or even contribute to students self-harming.

Many respondents described the persistent state of alert that they operate in as they navigate many unstable, unpredictable and emotionally dysregulated students in their classrooms. One participant described it as “walking on eggshells” and another explained “you constantly need to monitor your own behavior as ordinary behavior may upset students.”

This sentiment of vigilance and the need to adjust their actions and interactions to avoid situations where their professional safety might be jeopardized was also described in relation to parents. Some participants felt that they needed to self-monitor so that they did not do anything that would result in parents complaining, as these comments illustrate:

I have to be very conscious of what I say and do. Students and parents are known to make complaints about teachers for how behaviour is managed (i.e. tone of voice) or just how students are spoken to in anyway. They are twisting words and teachers are constantly being investigated.

I am always trying to cover my ass in case something goes wrong and I need to protect myself against parents who disagree with my decisions as a teacher.

A large proportion of responses discussed specific safety concerns regarding student and parent behaviors along with descriptions of a lack of adequate support or interventions that they felt was needed to ensure the safety of themselves or others. This is discussed in further detail in the next section.

Support from schools, systems and policy

Many participants felt that there was insufficient action or consequence in response to incidents of unsafe behaviors of students and/or parents. They described their concerns for their own safety as well as concern for the safety of students, both those who were perpetrating violent, abusive, or disruptive behaviors and other students who are subject to the effects of such behaviors.

Often, I have to make a decision on if I should protect students from other students and put myself at physical risk.

As well as the vigilance needed to protect others from harm, teachers regularly commented on the challenges associated with navigating the need to continue to have productive and positive relationships with those who threaten safety, as this respondent described:

This is one of the only jobs in the world where if you are verbally abused you are told to take it on the chin and get back out there. If you are physically abused then, yeah here is some time to heal or whatever but we still need you to take the class where the kid who abused you is still there

This requirement to balance their own and others' safety while also being in a position of care for the perpetrator's education was a feature of comments by many respondents. This tension was often related to the support available to help manage these circumstances, as this quote illustrates.

I am not supported enough regarding violent student behaviours within the classrooms. I am not able to ensure the other students' safety and therefore my duty of care is questionable. My mental health is compromised due to the stress and overwork.

Some respondents specifically referred to tensions that emerged from the different rights of those interacting in schools.

Teachers have no rights, and we are constantly challenged by students and parents. Sometimes there is no support provided by leaders. The level of violence from students is increasing daily.

Kids threaten violence. We are bullied and verbally abused regularly. We've had one student physically assault a staff member and we were told by district office staff that the student's right to an education is held higher than our right to a safe workplace.

Many participants extended their reflections to discuss the ways that support, or even their physical protection, was constrained because of the policies and expectations that were in place at a system level. One aspect mentioned were policies of exclusion for students who had significantly violated school rules, usually associated with violence. The issue of exclusion policies had been prominent in early 2022, particularly in the state of New South Wales, where a new policy that aimed to reduce the

rates of expulsion and suspension had been implemented (Barker, 2022). Some comments reflected on the expectation of inclusion and support for students, along with the responsabilization of teachers to accommodate students who are challenging in terms of behavior. This story is one that indicates frustration felt with these circumstances:

The line for what is acceptable behaviour in schools has shifted dramatically and staff are expected to accept violence and disrespect and to be responsible for students who are self-harming and at risk of suicide ideation with insufficient professional support. The new behaviour policy for NSW will mean it will be even more difficult to suspend students. How are we supposed to have time to put risk management and health care plans in place? How are we supposed to engage the majority of the students in our lessons when one (or more) have behaviour that is so extreme that it is literally impossible to teach with them in the room? And it's impossible to get them to leave the room.

The issue of responsibility for students' behavior was regularly noted. Teachers felt the burden of this responsibility alongside the rising incidences of challenging behaviors and perceived reduction in external support. In some comments, it was evident that teachers were being explicitly told that they should accept challenging and unsafe behaviors as part of their job.

Students at my school hit, punch, bite and knock down teachers and we don't expel or exclude students. Scary as all hell. I was told by a deputy last year that it was my fault and I needed to move faster.

In the past 6 years I have been punched, hit, pinched, kicked, scratched, and had my breasts and groin grabbed. My hand hurts permanently from a student who grabbed my little finger and twisted it till it crunched- twice. My principal says, "all teachers get hit or spat on at some time in their career - they just get on with it."

Overall, the respondents' comments portrayed a sense of not being cared about or cared for as they worked in unsafe conditions. They suggested increased concerns about unsafe conditions that resulted from teacher-directed violence along with inadequate support and resources both at the level of their school and from their leaders, and more broadly from the systems in which they were working. This final quote from a participant starkly illustrates the magnitude of concerns that some educators are managing, as well as the personal toll that can result.

The classroom and a school are unpredictable places these days. I have had experiences of students walking into my classroom having slit their wrists, I have dealt with a student attempting to jump from the building, I have faced disclosures of rape and teen pregnancy. I have had to mitigate family violence, peer violence and volatile parents. I have had to apologise to students and parents for managing my classroom. No one has ever asked after these events if I am ok or followed up with me. I've managed other staff breaking down or looking to me for support. Most of the reason I need [to] seek private therapy is because of work. I am not ok.

This final quote highlights that social issues and concerns permeate the boundaries of a classroom. It is a stark reminder that educational and social purposes of schools are blurred and that educators offer a great deal more care and support to their students and communities than a documented curriculum and assessment policies and practices can capture. It also shows that this takes a personal toll on educators and that this toll will be more pronounced if appropriate support for this growing component of teaching work is insufficient.

Discussion and conclusion

In our engagement with these data around teachers' sense of safety, we have felt compelled to attend to the disturbing stories of teacher-directed violence, both physical and psychological that many Australian teachers are managing as part of their everyday work. By investigating the data from the two time points (2019 and 2022), it seems that safety concerns are increasing, and this corroborates international trends regarding escalation in teacher-directed violence occurring in schools (Benbenishty & Astor, 2011). These data also suggest that teachers who feel unsafe in their workplace may be less satisfied with their role, and that it is more likely that they intend to leave the profession. While these indicators are

somewhat obvious, it is a valuable contribution to conversations of teacher burnout and teaching workforce shortages (cf. Gråstén & Kokkonen, 2020; Olivier et al., 2021; C. Yang et al., 2022).

It is important to turn this discussion into an acknowledgment that an integral part of teaching work is what is commonly called behavior or classroom management. This aspect of a teacher's work is often called into question both at an individual level and in observations of the profession, as calls for "tougher" responses to inappropriate student behaviors are made of teachers, whilst also holding them responsible for inclusivity and personalization that caters for the needs of all students. Further, stemming from long steeped traditional views of schools as needing to develop "compliant" students who are ready for outdated conceptions of the workforce, we agree with Sullivan et al. (2016) that "schools worldwide are under increasing pressure to 'control' student behavior and ensure 'good order'" (p. 2); yet, this perpetuates a problematic sense of moral panic and narrow conceptualization of the role of schools in 'disciplining' children and young people. Rather than behavior being seen as a problem (Ball et al., 2012), we suggest that schooling arrangements should prioritize more humane and relational ways of engaging with students to support their behavior and development. The predominant punitive and/or constraining measures have been shown to further damage children and young people in terms of their engagement with education and their mental and emotional health (Down, 2016; Reimer & Longmuir, 2021; Smyth et al., 2014), and possibly undermine their human rights (Johnson, 2016; Winter & De Bruin, 2021).

As we have drawn attention to throughout the paper, issues of power differentials in school settings are important to these conversations. Teachers do have a duty of care for students and as adults, an implicit authority over children and young people. Students do need to be cared for, as is clear from our data, but this caring work cannot be the sole responsibility of teachers. This study shows that teachers are harmed by the current arrangements and any changes that reduce pressure, tension and conflict in school settings would support the safety and engagement of learners and educators alike. Important here is that teachers alone, under the current conditions (including performative pressures and heightened scrutiny and accountability that have characterized marketized education systems) are not in a position to make such changes alone. This work needs to be a broader project of transformation (c.f. Kemmis, 2022; Longmuir, 2024).

To further examine ways this project of transformation might be framed, we now wish to draw attention to two key questions of the many that arise from our study. The first is, if schools are becoming increasingly unsafe places, due primarily to interpersonal harms, what are the prefiguring conditions that enable this? While acknowledging the site-specific nature at an individual incidence level, the overall trend suggests that schools are becoming more socially and emotionally volatile environments. It is likely that this reflects increasing volatility across local, national and global communities, combined with market values driving schools, including "commodification, competition, individualism, [and] privatisation . . . that have been profoundly anti-democratic and anti-educative" (Down, 2016, p. 88). It is not possible here to engage in a detailed discussion of these interactions of neo-liberal forces and social volatility, but it is important to highlight that the daily interactions of individuals in educational sites are shaped by these conditions. Just one example is the global COVID-19 pandemic. For many families and communities, the pandemic resulted in distressing and difficult health (physical and mental), economic and social conditions. Given the likely continuation of the broader social volatility in communities, greater understanding of how schools can and should respond to changing conditions is needed if classrooms are to be safe, stable, and supportive environments.

The second key question we wish to highlight here is that of support for teachers who are feeling unsafe in their workplaces. The data we have shared show that these teachers feel that systemic and local policy settings, as well as the work of school and system leaders, do not protect their physical or mental health. These findings support those of other researchers such as Moon et al. (2021, p. 7265) whose study in the USA found that interventions by school officials were "perceived as ineffective and inadequate." A further important policy and leadership issue is that positive relationships in schools between students, teachers and students, and

teachers and parents, have been shown to contribute to a safe emotional climate, reduce perceived violence, and increase “professional flourishing” for teachers (De Cordova et al., 2019, p. 6). Yet conditions of work intensification and time poverty resulting from intersections of accountability demands, less support and declining resources (Creagh et al., 2023) mean that there is less space for teachers to engage in relational work (Hickey & Riddle, 2023). This further suggests that a prioritization of humane and relational objectives of education would be of benefit to all involved and we suggest here that this is an issue of support and policy that needs further attention. We agree with Edwards-Groves et al. (2010, p. 43) who contend “that education is compromised wherever the relational dimension in educational practice is not properly addressed [and] that failure to attend to the relational may empty education of its moral and social purpose.” An amplification of the importance of teachers’ relational work should be considered in policy response to issues of school safety with the aim of re-balancing of the “learnification” of education (Biesta, 2015) toward more social and humanistic purposes that are needed in modern, diverse and often polarized societies.

As we have noted, teacher-directed violence is an issue that has not been adequately researched nor attended to through policy action despite the resulting damage to educative, social and personal outcomes for students and teachers and the communities they serve. Our data have further indicated that not only is this issue not receiving attention but there may be a pervading discourse that seeks to accept risks associated with teacher-directed violence. It seems possible that teachers’ concerns are silenced through an expectation that violence, abuse and intimidation are “part of the job” and that it is a teacher’s responsibility to manage such circumstances. We wonder if this is a manifestation of the way that an ethic of care is mobilized in educational work (McKay et al., 2022) and that it may, in fact, conceal the true extent of safety issues. Here then, we restate our position that teachers’ voices are essential to conversations about how schools are serving the needs of our communities. Greater attention to teachers’ voices may enable policy responses that move beyond a behavior technology approach (i.e. initiatives, interventions and strategies) that are bounded by orientations of “control” and “order” (Ball et al., 2012), toward more nuanced and reflexive possibilities oriented toward the relational. Given the situational and temporal nature of behavioral negotiations between students and teachers, understanding the lived and situated experiences within a broader social context is needed.

By highlighting these issues of teacher-directed violence that our research has suggested are a pressing concern for many educators, we hope that the take-away is not a suggestion of narrow disciplinary responses, but rather that what is needed is a broad conversation about how our schools and education systems might better support safe, inclusive and positive experiences for all involved. We suspect this requires a deeper consideration of what schools can and should do, along with a commitment from all stakeholders to view these disturbing trends of increasing violence, aggression and conflict in schools not as individual problems of specific students, groups of students, or particular teachers, but rather as a broader shared social problem for which everyone has both a responsibility and an interest in addressing. Further detailed research is needed to examine the ways that students, teachers, parents, policies and supports are interacting to either exacerbate or mitigate safety concerns.

To conclude our paper, we return to focus on teachers specifically and the possibilities and challenges to the profession based on their positioning within these broader trends of decreased safety and increased violence in schools. This study of teachers’ perceptions of their safety in schools has shown that teachers are subjected to these deteriorating conditions whilst their capacity to contribute to positive change is limited due to other working condition factors such as excessive workloads (Longmuir et al., 2022; Kelchtermans, 2017), and reduced respect in and trust for the profession (Longmuir et al., 2022; Mockler, 2021). In these circumstances, the impact on the current and future health and sustainability of the profession is concerning and potentially devastating for the future of our young people and the communities they will build. It is imperative that the flow of teachers currently leaving the profession is stemmed and that the profession becomes more attractive to future teachers. If this is to be achieved, issues of safety and violence in schools must be brought out of the “too hard” basket and examined in full.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix A

Table A1. Questionnaire items.

Question	Response format	Response options	Respondent population
Do you feel safe at work?	Forced multiple choice (single option)	Yes No	All
If you do not feel safe at work, please specify why.	Free-text		Previous response equal to "No"
How long do you intend to remain in the profession (teaching)?	Forced multiple choice (single option)	1 year 5 years 10 years I don't plan to leave until retirement Other	All
Overall, I am satisfied in my role.	Forced multiple choice (single option)	Recoded as intending or not to leave. Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree	All