Hostility from adults towards staff in school and other educational settings – experiences and responses

DECEMBER 2021

Simon Uttley

On behalf of Reading School and College Leaders

Contents

Acknowledgments

Executive Summary

- Schools and other settings, typically, enjoy positive relationships with parents and carers, both in normal times and during Covid 19 Lockdown and Post-Lockdown, the period of particular interest to this study. Nevertheless, schools and other educational settings have seen an increase in incidents of hostility and aggression, directed from adults towards school staff, both verbal and [less often] physically, over a number of years. The school environment has the 6th highest number of incidents of violence towards staff from a list of 25 occupations

- School leaders fully embrace a parent/carer's right to complain and routinely go the extra mile to improve communications with home. They are clear it is not 'complaints' that feature in their concerns, but rudeness and aggression

- The impact of Covid/Lockdown on society and the economy at the *macro* level has been reflected, at the *micro* level, evidenced by respondents to this survey.

- International studies have suggested a link between Covid 19/Lockdown and a sense of frustration, distrust of the State and a desire to 'go straight to the top', with concerns and complaints. This appears to be reflected in this small-scale study.

- This study suggests that the local school may have, on occasions, acted as a very accessible proxy for the 'State' during Lockdown, (not least in its social remit such as feeding children and delivering IT equipment). The corollary to this positive element is the extent to which it has also been a 'lightening conductor' for frustrations and anxiety.

- School leaders are, characteristically, generous with their time and their willingness to go the extra mile represents both a strength, and a potential vulnerability, when they are deemed to be accessible *at all times*

- There are a range of strategies adopted by school leaders to manage relationships with parents/carers, but also evidence of different levels of tolerance for abusive behaviour, from the very clear protocols involving Governor and e.g. LA support, to the 'it's just part of the job'. This inconsistency requires further inquiry as a possible implication of this study is that some school leaders *may* be putting up with too much, to the detriment of their well-being

- There are varying degrees of understanding, and support, experienced from local Governing Bodies, suggesting a lack of absolute clarity as to the experience of aggression, hostility and threats impacting on school leaders, their deputies, and front-of-house staff

- It is unclear, and significant, whether all schools have a consistent policy towards malicious complaining.

1.   Aggression and Schools

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of violent assaults against school staff by pupils and students [*The Independent*, 2018]. The GMB Union found that almost one in five of teaching assistants polled were attacked at least once a week, one in ten abused once a month, nearly a third reporting they have been injured at school and 21% saying this has negatively affected their work lives [*The Guardian*, 2017]. However, unreasonable pressure and aggression from adults – in particular, family members - is also a phenomenon of increased concern, and which can go unreported or seen as 'part of the job' for school leaders.

In 2018, Ofsted found that, in both the schools' and the Further Education sectors, relationships with some parents appear among the top causes of moderate or high undue stress at work. [Ofsted, 2018:37-38]. Where parent–staff relationships work, parents are 'supportive', 'appreciative' and 'positive'. In some cases, parents come to school to ask for help. All of this contributes to building positive relationships and allows schools to have a beneficial impact on the community. This is when staff feel 'they are making a difference to the lives of many families'. [38] However, relationships with parents are much more often a source of stress and workload for a variety of reasons. Lack of support with pupils' behaviour is one area of conflict. Parental expectations are another. Expectations become a problem when they are perceived to be unrealistic or unfair – for instance, to use the example Ofsted give, when parents expect the highest grades for their children despite their lack of effort.

Communication between staff and parents represents another issue. An open access to staff email addresses creates an expectation and pressure for an immediate response from staff (including senior leaders and headteachers). The increased use of apps has also presented both benefits and risks, with school leaders easily accessible. Some schools even have a 'culture of competition' in which parents share schools' response rates among themselves. As a result, the instant response email culture adds to workload and interferes with work–life balance.

Issues around communication become even more serious when it comes to parents raising concerns. A part of the problem lies in the trend of going straight to the *highest authority*. Staff in the Ofsted review pointed out that this is increasingly the case due to 'the culture in society of wanting to complain remotely at the highest level.' Skipping steps in the process of raising a concern has a clear impact on occupational well-being across staff roles. One school leader in the Ofsted report said:

'My email inbox is like a pit of death. My emails are incessant. I often receive 50-80 emails per day, even when I am ill. Some of these are important, but it means I have to sift through them to make sure I get to the important things.' [38]

When the headteacher is the highest authority, parents circumvent teachers. Whilst this report looks particularly at the impact on school leaders, it is worth remembering that, in schools in which senior leadership does not act as a buffer in the process, teachers feel neither supported nor sufficiently respected. In one school surveyed by Ofsted in 2018, a teaching colleague reported that:

'When a parent raises a concern, teachers are the last people to be considered. Teachers are not backed up. Incidents are investigated with pupils before teachers being asked for their opinions. Pupils are believed above teachers, which makes you feel vulnerable.' [38]

Certain complaints are even more aggressive in nature, being described as 'abusive' or 'disrespectful'. Senior leaders clearly outline a vicious circle that starts with a parent shouting. They notice that the situation can easily escalate with other parents who witness the situation, which leads to a 'mob mentality'. Despite strategies to tackle this, senior leaders point out that 'it is the odd few parents who can bring a school down.' This kind of parental behaviour introduces another layer of complexity to the previously discussed issues of managing pupils' behaviour. Respondents sometimes mentioned parents in conjunction with their children ('abusive parents and children'), which suggests that children model their parents' behaviour. In one school, specifically, leaders pointed out that 40% of their children 'have social, emotional and mental health difficulties which often have its roots in the parents' behaviour'. [38]

Lack of parental respect is manifested in different ways. The more extreme ways include inappropriate and aggressive behaviours described above, while the subtler ones are 'not having trust in staff', 'disagreeing with teachers' decisions', 'parents not taking teaching assistants seriously', or not acknowledging the support or skill set of staff. Some staff believe that media portrayals of teachers are generally not helpful and feel that there should be 'more support for parents to appreciate the profession'. This 2018 report does not go into detail as to the increased weaponizing of social media by disgruntled parents/carers, including 'invading' staff social media, though the latter is as much a reminder to school staff to lock down their social media as much as possible, as covered in the DFE's Cyberbullying: Advice for Headteachers and school staff (DFE, 2014).

Respondents to the Ofsted report reported a sense that there is an imbalance of power in parents' favour. Social media gives parents power to publicly express negative comments about a school. The ability to go straight to the highest authority and raise a complaint gives them further power.

The implications of the Ofsted report were that some actions at a school level could help with issues with parents, such as informing parents about the most appropriate ways of raising concerns and providing support to staff when a complaint has been raised. Schools could also consider replacing email communication with parents with other forms of communication (such as face-to-face or phone communication) or restrict access to staff's email addresses. The limitation of the report can be seen to be that lack of clarity as to what should, or should not be deemed acceptable, the need for benchmarking with other sectors in terms of how staff expect to be protected elsewhere, and the dynamic ways local Governing bodies / MAT Boards / LAs can be involved, proactively, in developing clear protocols to ensure that those most at risk – which includes school leaders - are protected.

2. Covid 19 and societal impact

The timeliness of this report is the recent [Winter, 2021] return to quasi-normality in schools and other settings and the implications, facing specifically school leaders, of dealing with children,

their families as well as school staff who have, in various ways, been impacted by Lockdown and its potential social, economic and educational consequences.

The British Academy (British Academy, 2021:7-9) identified three overarching categories and nine specific areas of significance to understand the impact of Covid/Lockdown. Below, a comment including reference to this current study, on the British Academy's nine areas, which this report uses as as a lens to understand the multifaceted impact of Covid.

- **Increased importance of local communities**. The respondents to this survey see themselves as deeply embedded in their communities which, it could be argued, has been both a huge strength, while also making them, on occasion, vulnerable to the fears and frustrations of some families. Schools and other settings are not only, literally, at the heart of their communities, but are very accessible and, particularly during Lockdown, have been to many families, both a symbol of authority and a 'State actor', involved not only in education, but also in what can be deemed social work, in feeding children and in supporting families.

- **Low and unstable levels of trust in governance**. It appears valid to hypothesise that, to the extent that schools have been perceived to be [and quite rightly] brokers and dispensers of Government policy, they may have also been victims of such suspicion. This has been writ large in responses to this survey, in the instances of threatening email, phone and, on occasion, face to face challenges school leaders have experienced in following Government policy, such as hosting vaccination and testing procedures.

- **Widening geographic inequalities.** The respondents to this survey reflect diverse socio-economic contexts. In more challenging locations, schools have reported their work in supporting families in atrocious housing, or living in areas of crime, including drug dealing. The impact on families of waking up in areas in which it is unsafe to walk, on top of Lockdown, can only be imagined.

- **Exacerbated structural inequalities.** COVID-19 and the government response to it have impacted different people in different ways, often amplifying existing structural inequalities in income and poverty, socioeconomic inequalities in education and skills, and intergenerational inequalities – with effects on children (including vulnerable children), families with children and young people

- **Worsened health outcomes and growing health inequalities.** Like structural inequalities, health outcomes for COVID-19 have followed patterns of existing health inequalities. There are ongoing health impacts from 'long COVID' as well as from delays in care seeking and reprioritisation of resources. Deficiencies in home and community care infection prevention and control measures, and inequalities in the structure and funding of social care provision, are evident.

- **Greater awareness of the importance of mental health.** Family resilience is variable in the communities served by the respondent schools. The impact of poor mental health correlates with poverty, not least in the ability to access and leverage the right support. Children and adults living in households in the lowest 20% income bracket in Great Britain are two to three times more likely to develop mental health problems than those in the highest. (Marmon, M. *et al* 2010). Employment status is linked to mental health outcomes, with those who are unemployed or economically inactive having higher rates of common mental health problems than those who are employed (Stansfeld, S. *et al,* 2014). Employment is

generally beneficial for mental health. However, the mental health benefits of employment depend on the quality of work; work that is low paid, insecure or poses health risks can be damaging to mental health (Marmot, M. *et al*, 2010). Finally, Jones-Rounds, M.L. *et al, (*Jones-Rounds, M.L. *et al, 2013)* found that those on housing benefit are more than twice as likely to have a common mental health problem than those not in receipt of it (35.1% as against 14.9%). All of the above can feed into the quality of home-school relationship and interactions.

- **Pressure on revenue streams across the economy.** In terms of schools, this is particularly felt in terms of pressures on funding for SEN children and the pressure, in many Local Authorities, on the High Needs block. Families with SEN children face many additional pressures, which, on occasion, can lead to heightened tensions over perceived lack of provision by the school, or a belief that the school is failing to consider special needs in the application of its behaviour policy. Both the latter were evident in some responses.

- **Rising unemployment and changing labour markets.** Employment and household income levels have fallen and will likely worsen for the foreseeable future. This will lead to an increased dependency on social security. Many respondents are serving families' experiencing employment insecurity and, in many cases, real poverty. These factors not only lead to anxiety and frustration - on occasion, spilling into their relationships the school - but also contribute to poorer mental health which can impact on the child's engagement with school.

- **Renewed awareness of education and skills**. We are only beginning to understand the impact of lost education on children and young people's intellectual and social formation, both of which [a] correlate to socio-economic background and [b] can and will affect the dynamics of the home-school relationship.

3. Covid 19, aggression and aggression towards children

Extensive work has been undertaken to look at the impact of Covid, and, specifically Lockdown, on aggression levels. Killgore *et al* (2021), in a very recent U.S study, hypothesized that continued lockdowns might be associated with increased feelings of aggression. Over the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ) was administered to a total of 5,928 adults distributed proportionally from across the United States during independent online cross-sectional surveys collected each month. Data across the 6-month period were compared between those under lockdown versus those not under such restrictions. BPAQ Total Aggression scores showed a significant main effect for both month and lockdown status, as well as a significant interaction effect, with increasing scores evident for those reporting that they were under lockdown relative to those reporting no restrictions. This same pattern was evident for all four subscales of the BPAQ, including Physical Aggression, Verbal Aggression, Anger, and Hostility.

This study is consistent with other studies into the effect of what can be partly understood as 'frustrated goals'. The present findings are consistent with the reformulated frustration-aggression hypothesis (Berkowitz, 1989), which suggests that the thwarting of a desired goal is sufficient to lead to a negative affective state, which then results in aggressive inclinations. This is also consistent with self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000 a, b) where, again, one's normal options as a citizen are, or are perceived to have been, seriously curtailed.

Additionally, as Killgore *et al* point out, macrolevel theories that incorporate the frustration-aggression hypothesis also predict increased aggression when there are systemic frustrations, such as economic downturns, restricted availability of resources, or perceived institutional discrimination against specific societal groups (Feierabend and Feierabend, 2016; Gurr, 1970). Notably, all of these systemic frustrations were pervasive during the late summer of 2020. Further U.S. work points to a significant increase in the maltreatment or physical abuse of children, especially among those who had a parent lose their job during the pandemic (Lawson *et. al.,* 2020).

In Lawson's work, participants included a community sample of parents of 4- to 10-year-olds recruited from Facebook adverts and from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) to participate in an online study regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on family interactions. Inclusion criteria included being a parent of a child between the ages of 4- to 10-years-old, being English speaking, and living in the United States. Their paper is worth reading in full, but it is significant that children of parents who experienced job loss related to the COVID-19 pandemic were nearly five times as likely to be psychologically maltreated during the pandemic compared with children of parents who did not lose their jobs. Psychological maltreatment includes behaviours such as verbally threating to harm children, belittling, and ridiculing children. Parental job loss was additionally associated with an increased probability of physical abuse during the pandemic. Physical abuse, as measured in the Lawson study, represents behaviours ranging in severity from corporal punishment (e.g., spanking, slapping, hitting with an object) to assault (e.g., kicking, hitting body parts other than the bottom) and very severe assault (e.g., hitting as hard as possible). Parental depressive symptoms and maltreating history were significant predictors of psychological maltreatment and physical abuse during the pandemic. The odds of being psychologically maltreated and physically abused during the pandemic were 112 and 20 times higher, respectively, among children that were maltreated in the year prior to the pandemic. These results indicate that parental depressive symptoms and maltreating history are important risk factors for child maltreatment during the COVID-19 pandemic [Lawson *et. al.*, 2020:4.2].

In the UK, anecdotally, the diversity of the child's experience during Lockdown – which links to the experience of school leaders immediately post-Lockdown – can be captured in the current binary:

> Michael, 5: We have to stay at home because of the virus. It's home learning every day. I see my friends on Zoom, like daddy has his work meetings. I like being at home because I can play with my cat. (Michael, aged 5, Children's Commissioner Lockdown Experiences, 2020)

> Alicia, 17: Most families are enjoying being at home 24/7 as it means they can spend quality family time together but for someone like me being 'locked in' with my mum is probably my worst nightmare. Caring for a parent with mental illness can be draining at the best of time let alone not getting the opportunity for some time out for example. For me school was an escapism so simply it allows me to act my age,

Covid19 has taken that away from me. (Children's Commissioner Lockdown Experiences, 2020)

Though this paper is not focussed on the abuse of children *per se*, it is surely a legitimate assumption that this child-centred, or at least child-related aggression reflects the increase in the overall quantum of hostility in some cases, and it is not an illegitimate stretch to see this as then spilling into the home-school relationship, once school returned to the near-normal of recent months.

4. Working in school : scale of the problem and legal considerations

In *Violence at Work: A Guide for Employers*, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE, 1996) defines workplace violence as: 'any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work'. The HSE goes on to say:

'This can include verbal abuse or threats as well as physical attacks. Physical attacks can cause anxiety and distress, and in more serious cases, pain, disability or even death. Serious and persistent verbal abuse may damage worker's health through anxiety and distress. In addition, worry about violence at work, even in workers who do not directly experience it, can be a source of stress'.

The HSE (HSE, 1996) lists those that work in education as one of the occupational groups most at risk from workplace violence. The table below shows the risk of violence at work for employees, reproduced from the 2020 Crime Survey for England and Wales. The results show that teaching and education professionals have a higher-than-average rate of violence at work. Across all groups, teachers have a significant level of violence at work, 6th out of 25 occupational areas. This indicates that the level of violence against teachers is higher than in a number of occupational groups including sales and customer service occupations and skilled trades. While this will predominantly refer to aggression from children and young people, the overall quantum of aggression and attacks that school staff face is significant and concerning, especially if this is also seen as 'part of the job'. It would be interesting to note how many Governing Bodies/Trusts are aware of this statistic.

Percentages	Adults of working age in employment[2]			
	Assaults	Threats	All violence at work	Unweighted base-number of adults
	Percentage victims once or more			
Managers, Directors and Senior Officials	0.8	1.2	1.9	4,029
Corporate managers and directors	0.5	0.9	1.4	2,724
Other managers and proprietors	1.1	1.9	2.9	1,305
Professional Occupations	0.7	1.1	1.6	6,800
Science, research, engineering and technology professionals	0.2	0.2	0.4	1,777
Health professionals	1.5	2.1	3.3	1,553
Teaching and educational professionals	1.0	1.4	2.2	1,828
Business, media and public service professionals	0.1	0.8	0.9	1,642
Associate Professionals and Technical Occupations	0.8	0.8	1.5	5,050
Science, engineering and technology associate professionals	0.0	0.0	0.0	542
Health and social care associate professionals	1.4	2.7	3.9	638
Protective service occupations	7.4	1.8	8.4	389
Culture, media and sports occupations	0.0	0.8	0.8	825
Business and public service associate professionals	0.1	0.5	0.5	2,656
Administrative and Secretarial Occupations	0.1	0.6	0.7	3,313
Administrative occupations	0.1	0.5	0.6	2,617
Secretarial and related occupations	0.1	0.8	0.9	696
Skilled Trades Occupations	0.2	0.2	0.5	3,690
Skilled agriculture and related trades	0.7	1.5	2.1	343
Skilled metal and electrical and electronic trades	0.3	0.1	0.4	1,352
Skilled construction and building trades	0.0	0.1	0.1	1,250
Textiles, printing and other skilled trades	0.5	0.3	0.8	745
Caring, Leisure and Other Service Occupations	0.9	0.6	1.4	3,716
Caring personal service occupations	1.1	0.6	1.6	2,939
Leisure, travel and related personal service occupations	0.3	0.7	1.0	777
Sales and Customer Service Occupations	0.5	1.6	2.1	2,086
Sales occupations	0.5	1.9	2.4	1,632
Customer service occupations	0.4	0.7	1.1	454
Process, Plant and Machine Operatives	0.5	0.8	1.2	2,558
Process, plant and machine operatives	0.2	0.1	0.4	1,141
Transport and mobile machine drivers and operatives	0.6	1.3	1.9	1,417
Elementary Occupations	0.7	0.6	1.2	3,405
Elementary trades, plant and related occupations	0.4	0.2	0.4	461
Elementary administration and service occupations	0.8	0.7	1.4	2,944
All	0.6	0.8	1.4	34,647

Source: Office for National Statistics - Crime Survey for England and Wales
1. This data is based on combined data from year ending March 2019 to year ending March 2020.
2. Men and Women aged 16-64 who were in employment in the last 7 days.

Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales for year ended March 2020

Fig 1. Assaults and threats by occupation - Crime Survey for England and Wales, 2020

The 1974 Health and Safety at Work Act

The 1974 Act applies to schools in the same way as all other workplaces. The most important duty under the Act for health, safety and welfare is that placed upon the employer. The Act also places duties upon employees and members of the public, so teachers and other school staff have duties under the Act as employees while pupils and visitors to schools are covered by the duties which the Act places on members of the public.

For staff working in a local authority-maintained community school or voluntary controlled school, they are employed by the local authority. The local authority is responsible for complying with the legal duties which the Act places on employers. (Although the governing body is the employer, it does however carry some responsibilities as a result of its delegated powers of management). For staff working in a local authority-maintained foundation school or voluntary aided school, they are employed by the governing body of the school rather than the local authority. For staff working in a sixth form or FE college, they are employed by the college corporation. For staff in an academy which is part of a chain, the employer is the academy trust and if they work in a stand-alone academy, the employer is the governing body. For independent schools the employer is the proprietor or governing body. It is those bodies which carry the legal duties of employers under the Act.

Employers' duties to employees (Section 2)

Section 2(1) of the Act places a general duty on employers "to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of all employees". The inclusion of the word "welfare" is important - it means that employers are required, by the Act, to consider matters such as rest facilities for employees even though they may not regard these as health and safety issues. It is also reasonable to assume that heightened stress and anxiety, including while at home, accruing

from adult aggression and hostility is also a proper consideration for the 'employer'. Headteachers have the same legal duties under the Act as all other employees. They also have contractual responsibilities regarding health and safety, as they are responsible under their statutory conditions of service for managing health and safety matters at the school. Their contractual responsibilities are, however, limited to those which can reasonably be expected of the headteacher, and they cannot be made to take on any legal duty or obligation under the Act which is properly that of the employer. Further, in their guidance on cyberbullying, the Department for Education (2014) state that

> "all employers, including employers of school staff in all settings, have statutory and common law duties to look after the physical and mental health of their employees. This includes seeking to protect staff from cyberbullying by pupils, parents and other members of staff and supporting them if it happens".

Trespass

Section 547 of the Education Act 1996 makes it an offence for a trespasser on school premises to cause or permit a nuisance or disturbance and allows for the removal and prosecution of any person believed to have committed the offence. The penalty for a person convicted of the offence is a fine of up to £500. A parent of a child attending a school normally has implied permission to be on the school's premises at certain times and for certain purposes but if the parent's behaviour is unreasonable this permission may be withdrawn, and they will become a trespasser. A person who nevertheless persists in entering the school premises and displaying unreasonable behaviour may be removed and prosecuted under section 547.

It is significant that several respondents to this survey not only include posters reminding visitors of their obligations while in site, but also back this up with notes in letters to parents and links on their school websites. It is an open, and an important question, how many Governors are aware of this specific legislation and are actively monitoring staff exposure to hostility and aggression.

5. This small-scale research and its limitations

This small-scale field research included respondents from schools, college and Pupil Referral Unit leaders from the Berkshire and South Oxfordshire areas. Brevity was demanded by the increased responsibilities facing the respondents, coming to the end of a term of unparalleled challenge, and with the prospect of an uncertain new year in 2022. Ultimately, responses were received from 40 respondents, including 30 Primary Headteacher, 9 secondary and one College.

Going forward, many questions asked can be further sub-divided to better capture any 'Covid effect'. In addition, a complementary study of parents'/carers' experience of schools would be welcome to provide further granularity.

6. Results

1. Taking the last two years as a timeframe, and reflecting on your direct or indirect experience of hostility or aggression from a parent/carer/adult connected with a pupil/student:
   Blue – the same
    Orange – somewhat more
    Green – much greater degree

The vast majority of respondents have seen an increase in levels of hostility experienced from a parent/carer/adult connected with a pupil/student. This is consistent with international studies into levels of aggression, as well as anecdotal evidence.

2. How would you describe this hostility?
    Blue – rudeness
    Orange – a 'threat to take things further' [litigation, complaints etc]
    Green – a threat of physical harm to another pupil/student
    Red - a threat of physical harm to another [non-employee]
    Purple – a threat of physical harm to an employee
    Brown – actual physical harm
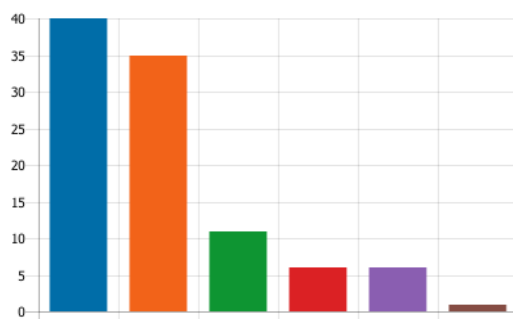
The main experiences have been rudeness and [non-physical] threats. Of course, one person;s 'rudeness' is another person's 'robustness' but the experience profile of the Headteachers surveyed is such that their interpretation is more likely than not to be a valid one. Clearly, the limitation of this question is that 'threatening' to take things further *can* include the legitimate statement by a parent that they intend to escalate a complaint. However, in follow-up meetings conducted as part of this

survey, the general response was that rudeness and lack of civility was, for several respondents, 'endemic' and becoming 'seen as an entitlement' and that the incidents to which they alluded were, precisely, taking place outside of the school's complaint's procedure.

3. What has been the prime trigger?

Blue – Covid protection measures
Orange – Covid vaccination measures
Green – application of your behaviour policy
Red – one-off incident in your setting
Purple – cumulative incidents [or perception thereof]

While Covid-related issues feature significantly, the general application of school behaviour policies seems also to be a common factor. The extent to which this links to Covid matters, or is a standalone, needs further inquiry.

4. Examples of incidents of concern

20 respondents (50%) answered parents for this question.

We have seen that a repeated issue was aggression, and threats [for example, of litigation]. What appears to characterise incidents in the last 18 moths is the extremely personal nature of criticism, some better termed attacks. In some cases, 'attacks' show signs of research into names, and details, of senior staff/Governors. This was particularly, but not uniquely, the case with the issue of the hosting of vaccinations and other Covid mitigations. Covid mitigation-related complaints included too much/too little ventilation in schools and parents making a point of not wearing masks outside school to express their disdain for the school policy. In addition, evidence of pupils'/students' medical conditions being played down (including giving inaccurate information) so as to secure their child's admission to the school when the pupil/student was, in fact, unwell.

School leaders being blamed for poor behaviour was a frequent theme, as was the expectation of immediate availability of staff – including being available out of hours. Another was parents/carers seeming to believe everything their child told them and give less weight to the school's account (than previously). There also appears to be, in some cases, a blurring of [a] the child's in-school behaviour [b] the child's social media narrative of their school experience [c] parents' social media narrative of their child's experience. Also, more comparisons and contrasts being made to how other schools approach matters.

Some schools were inundated with repeated complaints and accusations, clearly commensurate with hostile complaining. One area was attendance and the implementation of LA required attendance recording, leading to threats of complaint, notwithstanding this being a local and national policy requirement. Several threats of Ofsted, Social Care, DFE. It is unclear how the various schools [a] define and [b] address malicious complaining, or whether they have an up-to-date policy in this regard.

A common theme was a sense that parents/carers felt entitled to 'vent' with impunity – that the normal checks and balances had gone, and now schools and their staff were a legitimate target. Some venting was directed at, e.g. certain students [e.g. in one response, recipients of EHCP 'getting' more than their child]. It would be interesting to test the hypothesis that the frustration with national policy may have found a vent in local, perceived 'agencies of the State' – such as schools.

Some respondents spoke of threats to themselves [including the very disturbing case of a school leader being threatened with headbutting].

It was recognised that a key driver was the lack of resilience among pupils/students [in addition to anxiety levels at home] which exacerbated issues, especially where the exacerbation continued into the small hours on social media. It would be reasonable to also assume that some staff's resilience would also have been depleted so it is not unreasonable to see this as a contributing factor to 'disquiet', though the levels of aggression, accompanied by threats, would in no way justify this.

5. How aware are your Governors/Trust Leaders of levels of rudeness/hostility from adults - 5 stars being fully aware

55% rated between "**4-5**" for this question

Score distribution

While over half the respondents felt their Governors / Trusts were fully aware, it is noteworthy than a significant number of school leaders felt the level of awareness was by no means complete.

6. How supported do you feel by your Governors/Trust Leaders in this regard [5 stars being 'fully supported']?

53% rated between "**4-5**" for this question

Score distribution

Rating score 1 2 3 4 5

Again, a positive number of school leaders felt very supported, though a statistically significant number expressed less confidence.

7. What do you do to address the issue of hostility/aggression/lack of civility? Please give as much detail as possible as this will help colleagues.

[A] Face to face comms

- Speak to them - the rudeness etc. normally comes in via email. So I invite them in to talk.
- Approach every situation with compassion and empathy in a quest to understand the feelings of others and their position and frame of reference. I am a firm believer that if I can get the person or people into a room for a conversation that I can manage the situation better. It becomes tricky when parents make the choice to go straight to formal complaints or Ofsted without consultation with the school because they feel this will get the speedier response.
- Stay calm; speak politely; find out the details; investigate, refer to policy, respond by letter or face to face following investigation, seek support when required; do all in a timely manner.
- Immediate contact with the parent. Revision of Complaints Policy.
- I have tried inviting the parents in to talk things through in a calm manner however when that still hasn't made a difference our Chair of Governors has written to the parents directly to say their behaviour is not appropriate.
- Remain relentlessly courteous
- Meeting with parent with a follow up letter
- Try and meet with the parents rather than resort to emailing. Refer them to our governors if they are not satisfied
- We communicate expectations in our home-school agreement We have a notice in the front office regarding conduct towards staff. Staff are trained in handling difficult conversations e.g. use of quiet/soft voice Staff are trained to diffuse situations by acknowledging how a parent feels e.g. I can see you are very upset All staff are told to terminate any meeting

should a parent become aggressive Leadership often attend meetings with class teachers especially if a parent is known to be tricky

[B] Other comms - De-escalation and policy responses

- It depends on the level of aggression. A letter outlining expectations has worked with some parents but not all
- Attempt to de-escalate. I have sent letters asking that parents do not come on site unless a pre arranged appointment to stop some marching in and demanding all sorts!
- At times through the legal department. At other times by explicitly stating that I will not be responding to them or not responding to them whilst they are not interacting appropriately
- Explain that we have a zero tolerance policy of aggression towards staff. Arrange to make a meeting at a later date, when they are calmer, with another member of staff present.
- Office staff have a script to follow if they face rudeness on the phone and are following this. They don't put calls through to me if parents/carers are already abusive and I don't take calls or see parents without an appointment at the moment.
- Staff direct angry/abusive parents to me or use the phone system to request support if needed. However, at this point parents/carers usually walk away rather than speak to me directly.
- I always follow up abusive or aggressive behaviour from parents/carers with a warning letter and my chair of governors will follow up any further incidents. I haven't banned a parent/carer from the site recently, but it has been touch and go!
- Liaise with Chair of Governors who writes to say we will be contacting solicitors and they are 1. not allowed on site and they are 2. allowed email contact with a named member of staff Then ask the Borough to issue a formal letter confirming this for a specific period of time. Then at the end of this period have a meeting to make expectations clear going forward.
- We will often phone the parent again at a later time during the day and explain that whilst we know they were upset, this was an unacceptable way to speak to staff
- Instigated school policies on dealing with unacceptable behaviour on school premises, engagement with external agencies, including the borough, early help, ews and behaviour support
- Block emails Ban from premises Inform Police and take families to court
- Newsletter- general reminders Solicitor letter in one instance
- Increase the level of home-school communication Communicate as much positivity to families as possible about their children Stay clam, clear and firm
- Mitigate. Mediate. Invite parents in for meeting with other SLT present.
- We are firm and polite and explain the measures we are taking and why.
- Remain the adult in the room. Remind parents in newsletters about the right of staff to work free from being shouted at/threatened - do unto others...
- I meet face to face to address the parents' issues rather than by email or telephone
- Ask the individual to make an appointment for a private meeting to address the problem (invite another senior member of staff to be present. Listen to the individual - let them feel heard but ask them to be civil Speak calmly Explain the situation/Repeat the school's rules or policy /Explain the reason for the rule
- Don't take it personally. Try to keep communication open... Ensure another member of staff who was not part of original incident builds a relationship with parent.
- There is a clear code of conduct for parents/carers. We write warning letter and issue a site ban, if necessary. We have pre-written statements to manage the PR

Comment

There are a variety of approaches, some more systematic, some more relying on getting the adult[s] concerned 'on side' if possible. There are varying levels of involvement of Governors / Boards, supporting the findings [above] that Governing Bodies in differing settings may have differing interpretations as to their role in supporting school staff subject to abuse/hostility and threat.

8. How effective have been the measures you have taken?

Blue – very effective
Orange – somewhat effective
Green – neither effective nor ineffective
Red – somewhat in effective
Purple – very ineffective

It is positive to see that 75% of respondents have found the measures they have taken to be effective or very effective. It is acknowledged that, beneath this, are questions as to the relative 'tolerance' individual school leaders have of individuals who are behaving in a hostile fashion. Interestingly, in answering question 7, above, one respondent said it was 'part of the job'. It would be interesting to benchmark individual cases, the school's response and the impact of this response to see if a 'sector standard' could be set. In addition, the 25% of respondents finding their approaches to have been ineffective may find it helpful to look at some of the strategies above and, where appropriate, share this report with Governors/Boards to reflect the extent to which this issue is a live problem.

9. Which members of your team have been particularly affected by hostility/aggression/rudeness?

Blue – school welcome/reception staff
Orange – the Head of the school
Green – the immediate Deputy [or equivalent]
Red – classroom teachers
Purple – learning support/TA colleagues

This reflects the anecdotal evidence that hostility in schools and other settings is felt, disproportionately, by those most available and those deemed most senior: school front-of-house staff and the senior leadership. This is in no way to underplay the impact on other colleagues, but suggests again, first that Governors and others are aware of this asymmetric impact and, second, that there is a need for a clearer answer to the question: what level of abuse or hostility should I be expected to deal with, how will I be supported and how can we reduce such incidents?

7. Conclusions

This small-scale investigation sought to test the increasing, largely anecdotal evidence, that hostility and aggression towards school staff was [a] problematic in schools and [b] had been exacerbated by Covid/Lockdown. It also located itself within international studies highlighting the correlation between Covid/Lockdown and heightened levels of anger and hostility. The initial evidence is that these two points are demonstrated in the responses received.

The report has highlighted varying degrees of understanding [and support] from Governing Bodies to what, disproportionately, impacts the school leader [or deputy], together with front-of-house staff. To this extent it raises the question as to how this phenomenon can be better understood by all, to avoid the erroneous expectation that to receive a certain level of abuse [from adults] is somehow 'ok', where this is no longer the case in most other sectors of employment.

Schools demonstrate a diverse array of responses, from the highly proactive [fully engaging the Governing Body and, for example, the Local Authority] to approaches based on trying to reason with an angry parent. While both these responses sit on a unified continuum of valid approaches, it may be valuable for some settings to more formally engage their Governors/Boards in putting together a more concerted response, at the same time of alerting Governors to the nature and frequency of hostility and aggression in schools.

Notes

Berkowitz, L., (1989). Frustration-aggression hypothesis: examination and reformulation. *Psychological bulletin*, *106*(1), 59.

British Academy, The (2021). 'The Covid decade: understanding the long-term societal impacts of Covid 19' in *The British Academy – Covid 19 and Society*

Busby, E., *The Independent,* (31st January, 2018), 'Education workers suffer increased levesl of serious injuries, new figures show' https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/education-workers-injuries-attacks-increased-levels-violence-a8186016.html viewed 10.12.21

Children's Commissioner, 2020. *Lockdown Experiences: What Being in Isolation Is Like for Children*. https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/04/21/lockdown-experiences-what-being-in-isolation-has-been-like-for-children/. viewed 10.12.21

Department for Education, 2014 'Cyberbullying: Advice for Headteachers and school staff' https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/374850/Cyberbullying_Advice_for_Headteachers_and_School_Staff_121114.pdf viewed 10.12.21

Doward, J., (4th June 2017) ' Most school support staff have been assaulted by pupils' *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/jun/03/most-school-support-staff-assaulted-by-pupils-union-survey viewed 10.12.21

Feierabend, I. K., & Feierabend, R. L., (1966). Aggressive behaviors within polities, 1948-1962: a cross-national study 1. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *10*(3), 249-271

Gurr, T. R. (2015)., *Why men rebel*. Oxford : Routledge.

Health and Safety Executive, (1996) 'Violence at work: a guide for employees' https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg69.pdf

Health and Safety Executive, (2021) 'Crime survey for England and Wales – data by occupation, year ended March 2020 https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causinj/violence/work-related-violence-report.pdf viewed 10.12.21

Jones-Rounds, M.L., Evans, G.W., & Braubach, M. (2013). The interactive effects of housing and neighbourhood quality on psychological well-being. Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health, 68, 171–175

Killgore, William D.S. Cloonan, Sara A., Taylor, Emily C., Anlap, I. and Dailey, Natalie S., 'Increasing aggression during the COVID-19 lockdowns' in *Journal of Affective Disorders Reports,* Volume 5, July 2021, 100163, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadr.2021.100163. viewed 11.12.21

Marmot, M., Allen, J., Goldblatt, P., Boyce, T., McNeish, D., Grady, M., and Geddes, I. (2010) 'Fair society, healthy lives: strategic review of health inequalities in England post 2010. Retrieved from instituteofhealthyequity.org/projects/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review

Ofsted, 2018., Teacher well-being at work in schools and further education providers https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/936253/Teacher_well-being_report_110719F.pdf viewed 10.12.21

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L., (2000a). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions. *Contemporary educational psychology*, *25*(1), 54-67.

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L., (2000)b. Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American psychologist*, *55*(1), 68.

Stansfeld, S., Clark, C., Bebbington, P., King, M., Jenkins, R., & Hinchliffe, S. (2016). Chapter 2: Common mental disorders. In S. McManus, P. Bebbington, R. Jenkins, & T. Brugha (Eds.), *Mental health and wellbeing in England: Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey 2014*. Leeds: NHS Digital.

U.K. Parliament (1974) *Health and Safety at Work Act*
https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1974/37/contents viewed 20.12.21

Appendix 1 - Strategies

Know the law Remember, visitors are on site to the extent that you, as school leader, give them permission. Once you retract the permission they MUST leave, or they risk committing an offence.

Know your thresholds What will you accept, in terms of abusive/threatening language or behaviours? [Hopefully nothing]. How many warnings will you give? Do your Governors have pre-written warning letters/banning protocols [LA in case of community schools]?

Display a poster
Display in a public place informing all visitors that they are welcome as long as they do not behave in an abusive or aggressive way. The poster should make clear that in such circumstances they will be removed from the premises and may be subject to prosecution.

Develop a policy on dealing with abusive visitors
The policy should set out clear procedures on:

- What to do when an incident arises
- Who to contact during an emergency
- How to record incidents and who to report the incident to
- What follow-up action is necessary (for example, whether any legal action should be taken)
- These procedures should be fully understood, supported and promoted by the Governing Body / Board [as per scheme of delegation], with due regard to the support available form the LA legal team, and should not have to be formulated *after* an incident takes place

Identify the risk of abuse or violence from parents
An assessment of risk to staff and others from abusive or violent visitors should be carried out to identify, in particular:

- What the risks are (for example, abuse, threatening behaviour, violence, and from whom)
- Who is likely to be at risk (for example, reception staff, teachers, the caretaker)

The risk assessment should identify and assess risks and determine appropriate actions. This will help the school to minimise risks by taking steps to manage them.

If particular visitors are a cause for concern, trying to establish what 'triggers' them becoming aggressive, so that you can avoid this sort of situation.

Train staff to reduce aggression
In some cases, potential violence can be reduced and even prevented if staff have the skills to spot conflict and to reduce aggression before violent action occurs.

Staff can be offered personal safety training, which can help to:

- Reduce violent attacks by parents and others
- Enable staff to defuse aggression and prevent situations escalating
- Teach staff to recognise verbal and non-verbal precursors to aggression and use techniques to calm a potential assailant
- Improve staff confidence in dealing with aggression and the resulting stress

- Minimise the risk of an attack causing injury

.

Collect evidence of abusive behaviour

Photographic evidence of any injuries or damage, or relevant CCTV footage, can be helpful when proceedings are brought against an assailant.

Recording incidents will also help in reviewing the school's policy and should ideally inform future risk assessments.

If there is an injury to a member of staff caused by assault, the employer may need to report the injury to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) under the requirements of the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (RIDDOR) 2013.

Aggressive or violent parents with mental health issues

If the school does not have information about the nature of the mental health issue, it should contact whichever service is supporting the family.

The parent may be supported by a body that coordinates several services, such as a Team Around the Child or Family, or a Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub. Alternatively, the family may have a social worker who can provide the school with information and advice.

Other agencies working with the family may be able to offer advice on how best to work with the parent and avoid them becoming aggressive.

The school could also contact previous schools attended by the child or check whether the family is known to the neighbourhood police.

Schools could also contact the LA to request information and guidance from health services available locally.

Ensure staff trained as mental health first aiders.

Organise meetings strategically

If a parent's behaviour has been aggressive, there should be more than one member of staff present at meetings.

These meetings should be managed considerately. If the parent appears to be particularly agitated, try to direct them to a suitably quiet place, with a senior member of staff in attendance.

In this situation, staff do not necessarily have to solve the parent's problem immediately. Instead, ensuring their question is acknowledged and recording the concern can be sufficient to de-escalate the situation.

Notes should be taken so that there is no ambiguity about what happened. Records should include the parent's own words as much as possible. The notes should also be read back to the parent, so that they can see that their opinion has been noted accurately.

If the meeting becomes confrontational, it should be terminated and re-scheduled. The reasons for this should be explained clearly to the parent in a letter.

Follow existing procedures

Schools should still follow their procedures for dealing with difficult visitors. For example, make clear to the parent what behaviours won't be tolerated, and refer to existing policy statements on how visitors are expected to treat staff.

Call the police if necessary

If a parent becomes violent, threatening or abusive in school, call the police to deal with the incident.

Ensure there is a relationship with the schools' officer to get advice.